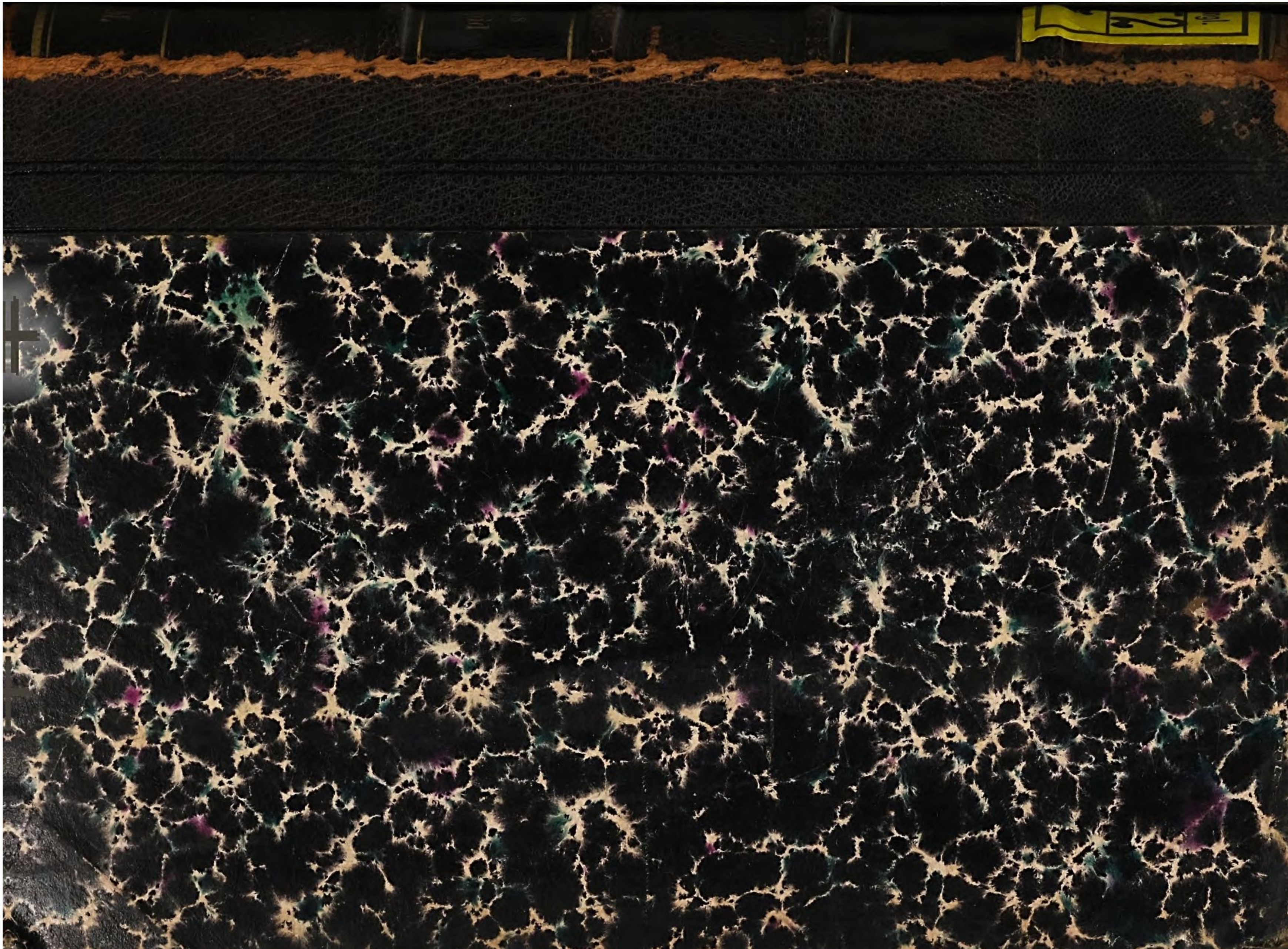

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VENUS AND CUPID.

INTRODUCTION.

"Look here, Q," said Venus; "if you lie sprawling any longer on that damp cloud, I shall have you laid up with the influenza."

"Perhaps it *is* a trifle chilly," replied Cupid, wiping his little nose without his little handkerchief, and sneezing ethereal sneezes as a small god only can. "But it won't cost *you* anything, Mummy. I've got some medicine of my own."

"And who gave it you, I should like to know? Minerva?"

"I should just think not, indeed! She's a great deal too prim and proper for me. I never go near her."

"Aesculapius, then, I suppose?"

"No, nor Aesculapius either. Think I'd trust my delicate constitution to an old humbug like that? He knows nothing; behind the age entirely. I say, Mummy, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course I can, when I think proper. Out with it, unless you want a whipping."

"Boo, woo—you wouldn't whip a poor boy for nothing, would you? Better leave me alone," continued the little rascal, bending his bow. "If you come a step nearer, I'll shoot you!"

"I was only in fun, Q," said Venus, becoming alarmed, and tossing her long fair hair over the place where her heart was supposed to be, by way of protection. "There, put your arrows up again like a good boy; I won't whip you this time. And what is this wonderful secret, if you please?"

"Well, Mummy, if you'll promise not to tell, it's Ganny."

"Granny?" returned Venus, twisting a lock of her auburn hair, still salt with the spray of primæval oceans, round her tapering forefinger.

"Granny!" echoed Cupid, in disgust. "Gods don't have grandmammas. I said Ganny—and a jolly little chap he is."

"Oh, I know," said Venus, with lofty indifference—"that small boy whom Jupiter hoisted up to the skies on the back of an eagle. He's a cheeky little wretch, I always think; but what has he to do with your influenza?"

"Well, Mummy, of course you recollect the story?"

"Not in the least. I suppose I must have heard it some three thousand years ago, but it didn't interest me in any way whatever."

"Why, don't you know, when the old Jew had him carried off he was tending his father's flocks on Mount Ida—that is to say, he ought to have been tending the flocks, and that's the way they put it in all the classical dictionaries; but in reality he was leaving the flocks to tend themselves, and had climbed up a tree to steal the farmer's apples. Of course the farmer's big dog heard tell of it, and lay down and waited for him, with one eye open, at the foot of the tree—dogs always do, you know. But Ganny was a plucky little fellow, and he didn't care much for the dog—just at present. He was intending to sit quietly among the boughs and eat apples until the dog got tired of watching and went to sleep, and then hang on to a horizontal branch and drop clean on top of his head, as the fellow did in 'Peter Simple,' and brain him. Well, he'd been up the tree rather better than half-an-hour, and had put away about as many golden pippins as a boy of thirteen can conveniently take without wishing he hadn't, when he heard a sort of a rush and a whizz and a whirl overhead, and looked up just in time to see a huge black imperial eagle poise himself for a moment in the air, and then swoop down and light with a great thud upon one of the topmost branches of the tree. The tree shook like a hurricane, and such a shower of apples fell to the ground that the farmer's dog, who was just dozing off to sleep, dreamed he was being pelted with brickbats, and fled howling. As

for the sheep, they made for a gap in the nearest wall; and those that were not throttled in trying to get through the gap scurried down the slopes of Mount Ida like demons. Ganny hung on for his life, and just managed to keep his seat in the fork between two crooked old boughs, though it was as much as ever he could do to prevent being blown off his perch by the wind from the eagle's wings.

"'You're a nice-looking boy,' observed the eagle, with a courteous bend of his polished beak towards Ganny.

"'I've heard that remark before,' was the reply, 'and I'm rather sick of it. Would you kindly say something else a little more original?'

"'Oh, *I'm* not responsible for the remark,' said the eagle; 'I'm only delivering a message. I don't think much of you myself. But the Jew says you are the most beautiful of mortals, and he wants you to come up aloft and be his cup-bearer.'

"'And pray, who is the Jew—if I might be so bold as to enquire?'

"'Why, Jupiter, of course—the great Jupiter, king of gods and men. You've heard tell of *him,* I suppose?'

"'To be sure I have; and a precious old rascal he appears to be.'

"'I say, young fellow, if you talk high treason, you know, I shall be under the painful necessity of putting my beak into you.'

"'No offence,' replied Ganny. 'I dare say he's an uncommonly correct sort of an old gentleman when you come to know him. But we boys certainly read some rather rum things about him in the mythology books at school.'

"'All a parcel of lies,' returned the eagle. 'I assure you he's a most respectable person.'

"'Wish I'd known that before,' said Ganny. 'It was only yesterday evening at the night-school that I got caned because I couldn't remember what he did to Ixion. Next time they ask me what he did, I shall say he didn't. And so he wants me to come and be his cup-bearer?'

"'Yes,' replied the eagle, 'and I'm to fetch you up straight away. The Jew's dining out to-night with Bacchus, and he swears he won't touch a drop of wine until you come and pour it out for him.'

"'Well, I'm quite agreeable,' answered Ganny. 'Anyhow, it will be better fun than shying stones all day at those blessed sheep. I suppose he'll pay me well for my trouble. What's the yearly stipend?'

"'I can't say,' replied the eagle; 'you must settle that with the Jew. My orders were to carry you off instanter; so the question is, will you ride quietly on my back, or shall I dig my claws into your plump little thighs, as I do to the lambs and rabbits? The claws are precious sharp, I can tell you. I had fresh points put on to them yesterday

in Vulcan's forge. But I won't hurt you if you are good. There, put your arms well round my neck, and hang on tight, and keep your legs clear of my wings, unless you want them broken.'

"So off they went, and Ganny was hoisted up to heaven in no time. The Jew was beginning to get wild, because he had eaten a couple of dozen salt herrings for luncheon, and had got a thirst upon him. But he vowed he wouldn't drink till Ganny came, and then he drank rather more than was good for him. Don't you recollect, Mummy, how he threw a peck of pepper into Juno's face, because she said that Ganny was an ugly little beast, and ought to be whipped and sent home to his mother?"

"I recollect quite well," said Venus, "and for once I entirely agreed with her. But what has all this long story to do with your influenza?"

"Oh, I forgot. Why, don't you see, when Ganny was carried off, he had a big box of Quackum's Pills in each of his trousers-pockets. He had bought them at the village shop that morning for his mother on his way to work, and was going to take them home in the evening; only, instead of taking them home, he brought them up to heaven. But while he was taking off his things, and making himself look nice to go in and wait upon Jupiter, the pills fell out upon the floor. So I picked them up, and Ganny said I

might keep them. He says the mortals swallow one or two pills the last thing before they go to bed when they feel seedy, and wake up all right again next day. They are warranted to cure coughs and colds, and headache, and hot coppers, and anything. One evening last week, when Psyche and I had eaten too much bread and jam for tea, we took one apiece, and both got well in no time. Only I don't want anybody else to know about it, or else I shall have to serve out pills to dyspeptic deities all around, and then they'll soon be gone. Would you like to try one, Mummy? You're not looking quite so well as usual."

"Perhaps a taste might do me good," said Venus, putting one of the pills into her mouth and sucking it. "You *horrid* boy!" she exclaimed, after five minutes' choking and distortion, "what ever *have* you given me? It's the nastiest stuff I ever tasted in my life!"

Cupid screamed with laughter at his mother's grimaces. "I said *swallow,* Mummy—not suck," said the little rogue, holding his sides, and rolling over and over on a cloud. "Have another, and gulp it down properly. It'll do you a world of good; you're as pale as one of the Fates. Why, you didn't think it was a lozenge, did you?"

"I'll let you know what I thought it was, you naughty boy, next time I catch you without your arrows. Pretty sort of a trick to play your mother! Children have no respect for their parents nowa-

days. And did this precious youth bring nothing else but pills from the lower world?"

"Only a rusty peg-top, and a pocket-knife with two broken blades. But you see he doesn't have any pockets now, so he has no place to put such things. Have you ever been down into the lower world, Mummy?"

"I was born there, you know; but I haven't seen much of the place lately. You see they don't worship us now, as they did in the good old times, and I am by no means sure that we should be well received."

"Let us go down some day incog.," suggested Cupid. "I should immensely like to travel, and see life. When I and my boys go down to shoot, we are obliged to keep high up out of sight, or hide ourselves behind a cloud. It would be ever so much more fun to mix with the people, and see what they are like, and do a little shooting on the sly."

"We should never be able to find our way about," objected Venus, "and we can't talk any language except Greek, and we haven't got any proper clothes."

"Mercury can crib any amount for us; there must be plenty of Israelites at Athens. And he says there's a chap named Cook, who trots people round, and shows them all the principal European sights in no time. He's got an office at the Piraeus, and he sends out personally-conducted parties

every week or so. All sorts and conditions of people go in gangs—sometimes a very funny mixture of mild youths and middle-aged spinsters, and old buffers who have made money behind the counter and can't sound an H. Mercury says that Athens in the spring is full of them".

"That must be lively," answered Venus; "you really make me long to see them. But how are we to get at the fellow?"

"Send Ganny down on the eagle, and let him arrange it all."

"And how many of us do you propose to take? The whole celestial establishment?"

"Oh dear, no—only a select few. Let me see. The Jew wouldn't care to go; he's got his kingdom to look after; and he's getting gouty. Juno is too proud and disagreeable, and Minerva too stiff and cold. I vote we don't have any ladies except you and Diana. She must come and hunt for us. Then we shall want Neptune to still the waves when we go by sea, and Apollo to give us a little music, and Mercury to run errands and steal supplies, and Mars to pitch into anybody who insults us, and Bacchus to keep us going in wine. Pluto wouldn't go without Cerberus, and we can't have a three-headed dog shuffling along at our heels. Of course you'd like to take Vulcan——"

"Of course I shouldn't. While I am out for a holiday, I should prefer to be free. If I travel

at all, I'll travel as Miss, and not as Mrs.; and you must tell everybody that you are my nephew, not my son."

"All right, Mummy; and for the same reason I think I'll leave at home my beloved Psyche. She might sometimes be in the way, you know."

"Precocious little brat!" cried Venus. "You ought to be in the nursery. Fancy a child like you with a great girl dangling after him! Why——"

"Very well, then, that's the lot. There'll be just seven, besides your most obedient; and a jolly lark we'll have. I only hope the Jew won't cut up rough, and say we mustn't go!"

"If he does, we must send your friend Ganymede to coax him into a good humour. Meanwhile, go and hunt the boy up yourself, and tell him to fly down to the Piraeus and make enquiries. Now that you have put the idea into my head, I am as keen about it as you are."

CHAPTER I.

AN IMPERIAL EAGLE.

I WAS just putting away my papers and locking up my desk after an easy day's work at the office, on a cool but pleasant evening towards the end of February, when a boy of twelve or thirteen appeared suddenly at the doorway, and asked whether I was Mr. Thomas Cook & Son.

He was the very handsomest little fellow I ever saw, with long flaxen hair falling over his shoulders, not precisely after the manner of boys at that age in general, and yet not the least bit like the hair of any girl. There was indeed nothing effeminate about him from his head to his heels. His eyes were of a brilliant blue, but his eyelashes dark, and his eyebrows darker still; cheeks ruddy, neck a good deal sunburnt, limbs strong and sturdy, figure well proportioned and graceful, yet entirely boyish, and set off with that air of elasticity and spring which only a boy has at his command. I hate boys as a rule, and it never entered my head to take any particular notice of such an animal before; but somehow this little beggar fascinated me with his beauty, and I felt

a sort of uneasy suspicion that he must have dropped down from some other world.

"And what might be your pleasure with Mr. Thomas Cook & Son, supposing you contrive to find him?" I enquired, after gazing upon my young visitor with more interest than I had ever bestowed upon any boy before.

"The Jew wants him," replied the lad, as coolly as if he were asking the price of a railway ticket. "He is to take Venus and Cupid, Mars, Bacchus, Apollo, and two or three more of them, to Italy or somewhere on a personally-conducted tour."

"Mars, Bacchus, Apollo—*virorum*," repeated I, for I had not wholly forgotten the *Propria quae maribus* of my boyhood. "And pray, are Cato and Virgilius going too? And do you propose that we should extend our travels as far as the banks of the Tigris and Orontes?"

"Can't say, I'm sure," answered the boy. "They'll take your advice about the route. But I rather think they want to go West, and see something of Central Europe."

"They didn't say they wanted to see the central block of a good-sized madhouse, did they?" I rejoined, turning the key of the desk, and putting it in my pocket. "Now, look here, young fellow. You're a devilish smart-looking lad, and quite precociously deranged for your tender years; but it has become my distressing duty to see

that you are put under proper restraint, so do me the favour to walk with me as far as the Police Station."

"No, I shan't!" said the boy stoutly. "The Jew sent me down here to fetch you, and you had better come. He'll make it well worth your while. If you won't, I shall have nothing to do but to go quietly back again, and you can't prevent me. In a couple of days or so you'll be split in half with a thunderbolt, and we shall simply send our party out in charge of Mr. Gaze. It doesn't make the slightest difference to me."

"Poor boy!" said I, with unaffected tenderness, stepping up to him and laying the palm of my hand against his forehead. "Do you feel any pain about the temples when I press them? any feverish throbbings, fits of giddiness, acute headache, and so on? Does your mother know you're —come to see me?" I added, thinking perhaps it might be best to find out where the poor child lived, and take him home.

"My mother has been dead and buried these three thousand years," said the lad, with unblushing innocence. "She was Queen of Phrygia, and my father was King, and he sold me to the Jew for a pair of broken-winded old cart-horses. It was a shock to my feelings at the time, but I am beginning to get over it now. The situation has its advantages. I'm immortal, and I get any

amount of jolly good grub, and I don't have any lessons to do."

"Why, it must be Ganymede!" thought I, taking down a Lemprière from my scantily-furnished bookshelves. It was necessary to keep up my classics to some superficial extent, in order that I might have an answer ready for any prig who bothered me with questions on a personally-conducted tour. "Let me see," I continued, looking my young friend out—"the most beautiful of mortals, son of Tros and Callirrhoe. Well, the first part of it fits in, anyhow. I'll be shot if ever I set eyes on such a boy. I suppose somebody has told him he is good-looking, and called him Ganymede for chaff. A thousand pities the poor little chap should be so hopelessly insane!"

"Now, look here!" observed my mysterious visitor, with a gesture of impatience; "I can't wait hanging about this blessed place of business till midnight. Are you coming up with me, or are you not?"

"Coming up where?" I enquired.

"Why, to Olympus, of course. You know that's where the Jew lives as well as I do. If you don't, you'll find out all about it in that fat old dictionary, and a lot of lies besides."

"I am sorry to inform you, my dear boy, that Olympus is one of the places for which we don't issue tickets—at least not just at present. There is no rail, that I ever heard of; and I have reason

to think that even the tramway lines are not yet laid down. Perhaps, however, you were contemplating a trip in a balloon?"

"Balloon!" repeated the boy, with contempt. "The rotten thing would burst before we got halfway. No, sir; I can do better for you than that. I've got my eagle under a shed not half-a-mile off, and he'll take the two of us, quite comfortably. He's a tremendously strong bird."

"So I should suppose," observed I; "and you left him in a shed, did you?"

"Yes," said the boy, putting on his pretty Phrygian cap and taking my hand. "Come along; we shall be there in ten minutes. I'll show you the way."

I have always understood that it is safest to humour mad people in their fancies up to a certain point, so I determined to go with the boy and see what happened. Both my clerks had already left the office and gone home; but as I was locking the outer door I caught a glimpse of one of them coming out of a *café* at the opposite corner of the Piazza, and beckoned to him hastily. My young companion was too many for me, and observed the gesture.

"If you speak a single word to that man," said he, turning sharply round, "or to anybody else, until we get into the field, I'll go off by myself, and you may look out for thunderbolts."

The boy spoke with an assumption of quiet,

cool authority which set my fingers itching to box his ears; but it was an authority which I simply did not dare resist, and I felt myself tamely giving in.

"All right, my boy," I replied; "I was only going to hand him over the key of the office, in case I didn't get back in good time to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow's Sunday," said the boy, shutting me up, and astonishing me not a little by his command of the situation. "You'll be home again all right by nine o'clock on Monday morning, unless you're obstinate, and put the old Jew's back up, and then I can't say what may happen. Are you married?"

"No," I replied; "are you?" This was not a mere retort. A boy who had lost his mother three thousand years ago might, for all I knew, be a great-great-grandfather.

"Rather not," answered the boy, laughing at the idea. "Q is, though, and he is only about a year older than I am."

"And who upon earth is Q?" I asked, becoming more and more mystified.

"Why, Cupid, to be sure. You *must* be a duffer if you never heard of *him*. He married Psyche, you know, and rare fun we had at the wedding. Bacchus got so jolly tight that it took four demi-gods to drag him off to bed, and Aesculapius sat up half the night to mix cooling drinks for him. But, as you have got no wife to

sit up for you, you won't be much missed if you don't go home till—Monday morning."

By this time we had turned into a field just outside the town, at the farther corner of which was a cow-shed. It was getting dark as we reached it, but the boy seemed to know the way, and when we were within fifty yards of the shed he whistled. By way of response there came promptly a sound of rustling wings, and a peculiar gurgling in the throat which I have every reason to believe was intended to express gratification.

"He is glad to have me back again!" cried the boy, with a flush of pleasure. "You see how he'll fly at me when we get in!" And sure enough he did, taking his young master between his wings and folding him to his breast with the most loving embrace conceivable. In return, the boy put up his face and rubbed his cheeks affectionately against the eagle's shining beak again and again.

"What a magnificent creature!" I exclaimed, looking at the bird with genuine admiration and no little terror. "It is just as well you didn't leave him in the open field. He would have been shot for the Museum at Athens as sure as fate."

"Some fellow tried it on as we came down," said the boy, "but he didn't hit him. Besides, Vulcan has made both of us bullet-proof. Now, just hold the door wide open, will you, while he

gets out, and then jump on his back, and I'll scramble up afterwards."

"Well," said I to myself, "it won't be such bad fun. The creature can't do more than flutter along the ground with us, and the jolting can hardly be worse than the jog-trot of a camel." So I made a rush for the creature's back and threw my arms round his neck, while the boy kept on as easily as if the bird had been a pony. The eagle spread out his enormous wings, beat them three or four times on the grass, as if to shake all stiffness out of them, and then slowly rose into the air.

"Why, he is taking us both up with him!" I exclaimed, half dead with horror.

"To be sure he is!" cried the boy, laughing; "that's what I brought him for. Hold on steadily, and keep well in the middle of his back. You'll soon get used to the position."

"Stop him! you little devil!" I roared out. "If I had only a hand free I'd strangle you!"

The boy only laughed the louder. "Keep your hair on, old man," said he cheerily. "You're in for it now, and the best thing you can do is to stay quiet. If you get excited and wriggle about you may tumble off, you know; and we're five hundred feet above the plain already."

By good luck it was now almost dark, or I should have turned giddy and lost my head. I shut my eyes, that I might not see the lights of

Athens far below, and prayed what I honestly believed would be my last prayer.

"Don't you go to sleep," said the boy. "I never do when I'm on the eagle's back. And whatever you do, don't get your legs in the way of his wings. It's the only thing that makes him savage; he hates it worse than being throttled. You haven't got your arms too tight round his neck, have you?"

"If ever, by any improbable chance, we get safe to land again, young shaver, you and I will square accounts for this precious trick!" said I, feeling that the threat lost dignity by reason of my distressing shortness of breath and obvious terror. There is no mincing the matter—I was in a blue funk, and I thought that every moment my life was coming to an end.

"Which will it be, I wonder?" said I to myself, for I had not the remotest doubt that the gates of one place or the other would close upon me a few minutes hence. "I have been a bad chap at times—there's no denying *that;* and yet I have done my best to keep straight in a general sort of way." Then I said a collect, and then I tried to recollect a few verses of a penitential psalm; and then I remembered that I must not die with curses on my lips, and I had just been swearing at the young companion of my flight in language more likely to be current in the bad place than the good. So I prayed that he might

be converted from Paganism, which doubtless was his creed, and felt happier.

"I forgive you, my boy," said I, when the prayer was over.

"That's kind of you," was the reply; "though I don't quite know what I've done, except putting a good job into your hands and giving you a jolly ride for nothing."

"You have sent me to face Eternity," answered I, with as much solemnity as my chattering jaws permitted.

"You can face Eternity if you please, of course," said my companion; "only I don't precisely see what good you'll get by it. Better by half stay where you are."

"In five minutes," I resumed, rebuking his levity with increasing earnestness of tone—"in five minutes at the most I shall have lost my power of holding on, and I shall fall. We must now be many miles above the surface of the earth, and my soul and body will part company before we get half-way down. My body will be picked up in the morning a shapeless mass, and my soul—well," I continued with emotion, "whatever happens to it, I forgive you, as I hope to be forgiven."

"If you are fool enough to let go," answered the boy, "it will be your own fault, not mine; and I'm sure I can't answer for your soul, or your body either. But if you'll only be a man,

and hang on for ten minutes longer, we shall be there. Can't you see a streak of light a long way off, and some figures moving about, and a lot of woolly-looking clouds?"

"Yes," answered I, making a desperate effort to open my eyes. "I see something queer, but I can't make out what it is."

"It's Olympus," said the boy. "We are too far off yet to tell one figure from another, but Venus and Cupid are sure to be in the crowd, because they were both so keen about getting you to come; and they'll both be awfully good to you, if you fall in with their views."

I shut my eyes again for fear of giddiness, though the earth was out of sight and we were sailing swiftly across a sea of fleecy cloudlets. From time to time I looked up for a moment, and saw that the air was waxing visibly lighter and the group of figures growing more distinct. I now began to hope that I should escape becoming a shapeless mass; but some other change, perhaps equally objectionabie, was clearly in store for me. And what an adventure the whole thing was! Three hours ago, as nearly as I could reckon in my present state of whirl and breathlessness, I was adding up figures at my desk; now, if my young conductor were to be believed, I was at the gates of Olympus, and should sup with the Immortals! At any rate, there could be no mis-

take about the ride on the eagle's back, and that was marvellous enough. What a yarn I should have for my friends at Athens, if ever I got safely down again!

CHAPTER II.

A CONCERT OF PEACOCKS.

"HERE he is, Lady Venus!" shouted my young guide, slipping gracefully off the eagle's back, as the great bird alighted at the foot of a marble couch, on which the goddess was reclining. In so august a presence I would fain have slipped off gracefully myself, by way of making a favourable impression; but I was so tired and stiff that grace was out of the question. So I simply let go and tumbled, dragging with me a small cloud of fluffy feathers which had settled upon my clothes.

With better luck than I deserved, I fell clumsily but softly into the arms of a nymph, who lay at her ease upon the ground with some twelve or fifteen others, in attendance upon the queen of love and beauty.

"Well, I'm sure!" exclaimed the young lady, shaking me off, amid the laughter of the whole celestial throng. "If this is a specimen of your sublunar manners, the sooner you go back to your own country the better. Why, the commonest little faun that ever whistled through a pipe would not have taken such a liberty."

"I beg you a thousand pardons," I began, taking off my hat and bending low. "It was not an intentional rudeness, I assure you. Permit me to have the honour of wiping away a tiny feather that has presumed to settle upon your spotless and snowy shoulders."

"Hands off!" cried the indignant maiden, pushing me away, while her companions laughed the louder. "Did anybody ever see such a horror? Look at his coat, and boots, and trousers! No pretence of a fit about any one of them. And why does he throttle himself with an ugly stiff collar? I thought they only fastened collars on to dogs and slaves. A free man should carry his neck loose and free. I suppose at night they chain him up by it, lest he should run away. Do all the people go about like that in the lower world?"

"It is considered respectable to do so," I meekly replied, "with all becoming deference to the exalted beings who are less elaborately clad. Our climate, also, is scarcely as genial as yours, and clothing of a more substantial sort is a necessity. I don't defend the coat, which is simply a curtain hung on a man's back as a receptacle for pockets; or the full-length trousers, in which the comeliest of legs look mean; or the collar, which, as you very justly observe, is a badge of slavery. But we poor mortals are as

truly slaves to prejudice and fashion as any dog or negro to his master."

"Well," said the nymph, "don't stand staring at *me*. You must know pretty well what I am like by this time. You haven't taken your eyes off me since you landed. Go and stare at the Lady Venus; she's a deal more beautiful than I am."

"Comparisons are odious," I rejoined, with another profound obeisance. "Nevertheless, as you invite me, I will even pay my homage to that lovely being, whose name and renown have long been familiar to my mind as household words."

I beg to explain that it is by no means my habit to deliver myself of sentences such as these. But I had never been admitted to a Court of any kind before, and it occurred to me that in the Court of Heaven itself a somewhat stilted and high-flown style of address might be regarded as an indication of good breeding.

During this short interval my young conductor had been occupied in fetching water from a fountain to quench the eagle's thirst, which, considering the pace at which he had flown and the burden laid upon him, must have been excessive. I now turned towards my little friend and requested that he would perform the ceremony of presentation.

"With all the pleasure in life," said the boy, "when the eagle has done drinking. There, that's

enough," he added presently, drawing the cup away, while the bird prettily wiped his shining beak upon the lad's golden hair. "Now for the honours! Allow me to introduce—the Lady Venus —Mr. Thomas Cook & Son."

"Charmed to make your acquaintance, sir," said Venus, with a gracious smile. "But I must say," she continued after a moment's pause, "as yonder maiden just now remarked, you know how to stare!"

"Pardon me, madam; I seem to recognise an artistic friend. I think we have met before."

"Highly improbable," was the reply. "I have not set foot upon the earth for fifteen hundred years, when the last of my Temples was destroyed. We knew the game was up then, you know; so we retired with dignity, and shifted our quarters from Mount Olympus in Thessaly to this peaceful retreat among the clouds. Vulcan laid down an asphalt pavement for us, and Mercury stole a few odds and ends of furniture and ornaments from the lower world; so we were able to make ourselves tolerably comfortable, and we keep up the old name for long acquaintance' sake. But not one of us twelve great divinities has ever been down to Italy or Greece since the free-thinking mortals fell off so sadly from their ancient faith, and had the impudence to proclaim us idols."

"Mercury has," said the boy. "He went down only three days ago to steal my knicker-

bocker suit from a ready-made clothes shop in Athens."

"To be sure, I forgot Mercury; he often goes. But he does not stay. He simply collars what he was sent to fetch, and comes back again."

"All the same, madam, your face and figure are perfectly well known to me. I have seen you in Florence, Paris, Dresden, Rome, and half the capitals of Europe. Pray did you ever sit—or rather stand—to a gentleman called Praxiteles?"

"Never in my life," said Venus. "Now I think of it," she continued, after a short reflection, "a fellow of that name did make some statues of me for the Temples, and one or two of them were not so badly done. But he never once set eyes on me,* so the whole thing must have been a work of pure imagination."

"He failed to do you justice, madam," I politely observed; "failure was in such a case inevitable. And yet one can detect some sort of resemblance between the statues and the model, though unfortunately we now possess only copies from the original bronze. Your ladyship has doubtless heard of Titian and Giorgione?"

"Not I—have they been meddling with me too?"

"They have both painted you exquisitely,

* "But where has this Praxiteles been spying?"
Addison.

madam—the one at Florence, the other at Dresden."

"How dearly I should love to see the pictures!" was the reply. "You must positively take me there. Of course you know why we sent for you. Cupid and I have hit upon a scheme—but where is Q?" she enquired, looking round with a gesture of surprise.

"He will soon be here, my lady," answered one of the attendant nymphs. "Psyche has a garden party to-day, and Cupid has gone out shooting in the shrubbery. He could not miss a chance of doing a little mischief, though he was longing to be here when the foreign gentleman arrived."

"Well," resumed Venus, "Cupid and I want you to take us and a few more divinities in charge and show us round. I suppose you are willing, Mr. Thomas Cook & Son? But I can't be for ever calling you all that. Haven't you got a shorter name?"

"That is not my name at all, madam. It is the title of the distinguished firm which I represent. I am only manager of the office at the Piraeus, and my name is Tomkins."

"We must find you a prettier name than that," said Venus, musing. "Let me see, who was that Greek fellow who made the statues?"

"Praxiteles, my lady."

"Then I shall call you Praxiteles; that's ever so much nicer."

"Praxy for short," suggested the boy.

"Praxy for short, as you very intelligently observe. You're a good boy, Ganymede, for fetching Praxy up so soon. Come here and kiss me."

"Well!" muttered a stately goddess, suddenly stalking into the conclave from behind a cloud; "what next, I wonder? I wouldn't touch such an odious little brat with the tip of my finger-nails." The new-comer was evidently a person of some consequence, and all individuals present, except Venus, rose to their feet at her approach.

"Oh Juno," said Venus, looking carelessly over her shoulder and releasing Ganymede, who blushed with delight at the unwonted honour paid to him. Venus had never taken any notice of him before, and he was well pleased to be received into favour. "O Juno, this is Praxiteles, who used to make bronze gilt statues of me in the good old days. I forget," she added, with an absent air and an expressive curl of her beautiful upper lip—"I forget whether he ever did the same for *you*. Some few copies in marble are still left in the lower world, and we are going down with Praxiteles to see them."

Juno inclined her head majestically, while I struggled through the performance of a stiff but respectful bow. She was a female who can only be described as truly awful, and I felt sure that

I should never like her. "If *she* is going to be one of the personally conducted," said I to myself, "there'll be a row."

"Does he speak Greek?" enquired Juno, ignoring Venus, and addressing herself to one of the attendant nymphs. Anybody could see that there was no love lost between these two rival beauties.

"Like a native," said Ganymede, putting in his word.

"Hold your tongue," said Juno snappishly. "When I want an answer from your ugly little mouth, I'll tell you."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Ganymede, with the impudence of a spoilt child. Though he hated Juno mortally, he was clearly not one bit afraid of her.

Two gorgeous peacocks strutted beside the goddess, with tails that shone like jewels. Juno softly snapped a finger at each, and instantly there rose upon the air such a duet of hideous and discordant screams that the entire company, from Venus downwards, stopped their ears. Even the eagle showed symptoms of distress, and, but for Ganymede, would have opened his wings and flown.

"*That's* the way you laugh," said Juno, looking with contempt at Ganymede as soon as the noise was over.

"She does that whenever I begin to talk," said the boy, turning round towards me and

grinning, "unless Jupiter happens to be near. The birds are trained to make that fiendish noise on purpose to shut me up. But I don't care a button. For two pins I'd wring both their necks; only I'm afraid she'd have revenge, and poison my darling eagle."

"She would, you may take your oath," retorted Juno. "And I'll set the peacocks on again, unless you stop your chatter."

"For heaven's sake, don't!" cried Venus, putting up her hands. "A little of that goes a long way. Oh yes, he can talk Greek very well; can't you, Praxy?"

"It is the language of the country in which my business lies, madam, so of course I made a point of learning it. But I am not an Athenian; I was born in England."

"Where is England?" asked Juno, in a tone of aristocratic indifference.

"England," observed the boy, thrusting his forefinger into his favourite's beak and looking up at Juno as innocently as if he were saying a lesson in the schoolroom—"England is a small island in the Polar Seas, founded by a colony of maritime ghosts from Hades."

"Shut up, Ganymede," said Venus; "you'll catch it hot in a minute or two."

"Will no one tell me where this country is?" repeated Juno, scorning to take any notice of the interruption.

Thus challenged, I gave a short geographical description of my native land, together with such few statistics as I thought might be intelligible to the minds of the assembled company. I was just putting their credulity to the test with some astounding details of size and population, when a cloud at a little distance above my head burst suddenly in the middle, and from its woolly vapours emerged a youthful figure, radiant with light and joyousness, which seemed to come swimming, rather than flying, through the buoyant air. He was followed and surrounded by a troop of smaller children, of any age from babyhood to well-grown boyhood, the leader himself not looking a day older than fourteen. To my profound astonishment, this playful lad fluttered aimlessly for a few seconds around my head, folded languidly his wings, and lighted plump with his legs astride upon my shoulders.

"So glad you've come!" cried he, bending down to look into my face, and caressing my cheeks and chin. "You don't mind giving me a ride, do you?"

"How rude you are, Q!" said Venus. "What will the gentleman think of you?"

"He'll only think I'm a cheeky boy," answered Cupid, "and all the world thinks that already. But I say, Mummy, we *have* had such a lark! Psyche had got about six dozen nymphs and demi-gods to tea; so while they were strolling

about the garden we boys hid ourselves in the shrubbery and shot away like mad. In less than half-an-hour they were all as spoony as Acis and Galatea, and you never saw anything like the idiotic way they went on. Then we shot again, and made a lot of them jealous, and that was better fun than ever. They tore their hair and threatened to drown themselves in the river; and the men fought, and the women scratched and slapped; and by the time we had used up all our arrows and had to come away, half of them were in the sulks, and the other half upbraiding. Have you ever been in love, Mr. Thomas Cook & Son?"

"We're going to call him Praxy, Q," said Ganymede. "That's short for Praxiteles, you know—the fellow that used to make the statues."

"Did he make one of *me?*" asked Cupid, looking down into my face again.

"Several," I answered; "but none of the originals are left. We have only a few rather inferior copies, with patched-up legs and arms."

"It'll be rare sport to go and see them," said the boy. "Is it all settled, Mummy? Does he agree to take us?"

"Settled—no," was the reply; "we haven't yet got leave. But I think Praxy has a mind to do the showman for us, if Jupiter says he may."

"If Praxy *hasn't* a mind to take us," said Cupid, stroking the left side of my waistcoat with

his open hand, and pressing the tip of his finger, with scientific accuracy, upon a spot half-an-inch below my watch-pocket—"if Praxy hasn't a mind to take us, I shall fetch Praxy a gentle prick just *there,* and set him dying for some lovely nymph that he can never get, and make him jolly miserable. I can't do it now, because I've got no arrows."

"You wicked little wretch!" cried Venus. "Pitch him off, Praxy. I wouldn't have a great boy like that lolling on my back, if I were you."

"He may loll for a month, and welcome," I replied, "if he will only leave my waistcoat alone. I object most strongly to having that particular garment perforated. Besides, it happens to be a new one."

"Perhaps you think one of my arrows wouldn't go through it?" said Cupid. "Well, we shall see."

CHAPTER III.

A PLATFORM IN THE CLOUDS.

OLYMPUS, where the played-out gods and goddesses still reside, is the only remaining portion of the earth as it existed in classical times. It forms a sort of isolated terrace high up in the heavens, and, although considerably nearer to our planet than her satellite the moon, it is never visible by day or night to the telescopic eye. The country itself is not flat, but undulating, and beautifully diversified with forest, lake, and meadow. There are no mighty rivers, but innumerable tiny streams brim-full of trout, upon which the celestial inhabitants love to feed. The lakes are thickly populated with salmon, the meadows with stock, and the forests with almost every species of game. Vines of the choicest growth and luscious fruits are cultivated in abundance, and the harvest never fails. The country being purely agricultural, there are no gaunt factories to spoil the view, or funnels to pollute the air; labour is performed entirely by hand, and, as the population does not increase, there is enough for everybody. No babies are born in

Olympus; boys and girls are happy boys and girls for ever, and nobody looks an hour older to-day than he looked a thousand years ago.

During my short visit to this enchanting spot I did not succeed in discovering what became of the rivers when they had reached the margin of the platform on which Olympus stands. They ought, I suppose, to topple over into some idyllic valley of the Far East, forming the loftiest waterfall in the world. But, as they don't, I presume that they escape into some mysterious reservoir beneath the terrace, and are pumped up from thence by water-deities to supply the lakes anew. I did, however, ascertain, in response to several troublesome questions which occurred to my practical mind, that the place enjoyed the privilege of being a "peculiar"—in virtue of which it is held exempt from many inconvenient laws which affect the material world; just as its ethereal inhabitants are exempt from the vexatious limitation of threescore years and ten. By a special clause in this happy arrangement, the sun has been retained as a general warmer and illuminator of the surface, and the days and nights are equal.

Olympians as a rule are but scantily clad, and some few of the lower orders, who till the ground and tend the flocks in their pastures, are at certain seasons not clad at all. But the gods and goddesses do not appear in public as they appear in picture galleries and museums of sculpture. They

wear light, though highly becoming, garments, often lavishly adorned with jewels; and both sexes are passionately fond of colour.

In point of education the Olympians are behind the age. They know nothing whatever of science, and many of the lesser divinities cannot write their names. The higher deities, however, are persons of considerable culture. They possess a library of several thousand volumes, chiefly classics, and almost exclusively Latin and Greek. Many of these are valuable editions supposed to have been burnt or lost, but in reality purloined by Mercury from the library attached to some ancient temple. They love to read their own fabled exploits in the pages of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid. They are extravagantly devoted to music, although their wind and stringed instruments are somewhat primitive in construction; but their part-singing is incomparably finer than anything of the kind which can be heard on earth; and a chorus of boys' voices, sung there by ringing trebles that will never break, is without exception the most glorious effect of sound which art is capable of producing.

Such is Olympus, all scientific fads to the contrary notwithstanding; and, if you don't believe that any such place exists, you are an infidel. I have been there myself, and I suppose I ought to know.

The deities grieve daily over the thought that the mortals will have nothing more to say to them.

They ruled the world with a playful blending of beneficence and caprice for fifteen hundred years; and it does not appear quite certain, in the face of wholesale misery and venerable vices and newly invented crimes, that the world is in a very much better condition than when it owned their sway. They gave us poetry, and art, and language, and a mythology which lives yet in every ocean and by every forest stream. We enjoy to the full the good things they left us, but we will have them to reign over us no longer. They have retired with dignity. Though wounded in spirit at our ingratitude, they accept the situation, and make no effort to regain the empire from which they have been dethroned. They bide their time, looking forward to better days, but they meddle in our affairs no more. Once in a way, the king of the gods gets wild, and hurls a thunderbolt at some astronomical prig, who writes a pamphlet on it, and is made a corresponding member of the Asteroid Society. Once in a way, Neptune tosses the sea about until it is inconveniently rough, and sends some badly found sailing-ship to the bottom; but our steamers paddle on in spite of him, and laugh at the stormiest of his storms. Once in a way, Mercury, never a very dignified deity, pays a flying visit to the scene of his ancient pilferings, and commits a theft for which someone else will go to prison. These interferences are, however, few and far between, and prove only that the gods

must have their little joke, like other people. One goddess alone, and one inconquerable boy divinity, still reign supreme. Nobody has ever yet dethroned Venus and Cupid. She is still the Queen of Beauty, at whose shrine, as long as men are human, all knees will bend; and he is still the mischievous little god who spares neither youth nor age, who respects neither vow nor sanctuary, who fills the live air with his wicked sprites, as summer fills it with swallows, and bids them let fly their arrows right and left with reckless choice of object, but unerring aim, until they have made fools of the wisest, and cowards of the bravest, and fettered slaves of all.

CHAPTER IV.

IN CUPID'S DRESSING-ROOM.

THE clocks at Olympus are so very much in advance of those at Athens that, although I left the Piræus on my eventful journey soon after seven on Saturday evening, I did not reach the abode of the celestials until nearly five on Sunday afternoon. In those well-regulated altitudes the sun always sets at six, but twilight lasts for about forty minutes longer, and at seven the immortals dine. I was beginning to wonder whether I should ever get anything to eat, when a sound as of bull-frogs *in extremis* smote mournfully upon my ear, and was followed up a few seconds afterwards by the appearance of two youthful satyrs, each holding to his mouth a very short flute-shaped instrument, pierced with some half-a-dozen holes. The dolefulness of the noise which their lips emitted is inconceivable.

"That's for dinner!" cried Ganymede, "and my ride has made me hungry. Are you ready for some grub, Praxy?"

"Indeed I am," I replied, doubting much within myself whether any food likely to be offered me

in those regions would go far towards satisfying my hunger.

"Trot along, then," said Cupid, touching up my flanks with his heels. "Turn to the left at the edge of the nearest cloud, and you'll see the dining-hall in front of you. Would you like to wash your hands?"

"Certainly," I replied, "and change my clothes as well; only unfortunately I have brought nothing with me."

"Doesn't make a bit of difference," said Cupid. "The Jew won't mind. We'll make him believe you're in full Court dress. You may go home to supper, boys," he added, turning to the troop of youngsters who came fluttering behind us; "I shan't want you again to-night. But you must make a couple of thousand good sharp arrows between you before the morning, unless you want the bowstring."

So saying, he guided me to his own dressing-room, slipped off my back, and poured me out some cold water into a basin.

"No hot water turned on just at present," said the boy; "hope you can manage with cold. Baby faun crawled into one of the pipes, and we can't get the little beggar out again."

"Wasn't the child scalded to death?" I enquired.

"Oh dear no; a faun's hide takes a deal of scalding, even at that tender age. Do you use

Pears' soap?" he asked, pointing to a cake of that celebrated toilet requisite which lay in a saucer on the wash-hand stand. "Mercury brought a box of it up from Athens the other day. It's the best I ever had for lathering; only I wish they'd make it smell of something else except leather."

"How does Mercury contrive to prig all these things without getting caught?" I asked, as we dipped our hands together into the water.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes he disguises himself, and sometimes makes himself invisible. He's a devilish clever fellow, is Mercury."

"Shall I see him to-night at dinner?"

"Oh yes, you'll see them all—that is, all the swells. There's going to be a big feed, on purpose to trot you out."

"And is Jupiter a very awful individual to meet? I'm beginning to feel nervous."

"What! the Jew? Best-tempered old fellow in the world, if you take him the right way. He's moderately ignorant, you know, and he doesn't like being contradicted. I don't know any elderly gentleman who does."

"He must be a most tremendous age," I observed, in a drawling tone of calculation.

"Thousands and thousands of years," said Cupid; "but that's nothing. All of us are. I'm the oldest of the lot, I believe, if it comes to that; though you wouldn't think it, to look at me and feel my skin. It's glorious fun being always a

boy. I like you, Praxy; you're so jolly innocent; and you gave me a ride."

"I'll give you fifty," said I, rather amused at the simplicity of the boy's delights, "if a little thing like that will please you. But I hope you'll stand by me at dinner, and help me if I say the wrong thing or get into a row. I never dined with gods and goddesses before, and the situation is what you may call trying."

"They won't bite you," said Cupid, slinging his empty quiver over his right shoulder; "pluck up your courage, and come along!"

So he jumped once more upon my back, picked up from a corner of the dressing-table his unstrung bow, and a few seconds afterwards we passed through a curtained entrance into the dining-hall.

The room was built entirely of marble, the walls being panelled at intervals with oblong slabs which took so high a polish that they served as mirrors. Between the slabs were fluted pilasters, tastefully picked out with gold and colour, and imitated from the antique. The columns which supported the richly coffered ceiling had gilded Corinthian capitals, and the pavement was beautifully inlaid with a mosaic of marble scraps and porphyry. Anybody could see that the architect, whoever he was, had intended to reproduce some building of the best period in ancient Rome or Athens; and, as far as my uncultivated eye was

able to gauge his work, he had succeeded both in detail and design.

At the upper end of the hall stood a horse-shoe table, covered with a snow-white cloth, and laden with cut-glass, porcelain, gold and silver cups, and alabaster vases. In the centre of the convex curve was a marble throne—not raised above the other seats, but distinguished by its high straight back, its elaborately sculptured arms, and its velvet cushion. Within the gable which formed the termination of the back was an imperial eagle, inlaid with tiny squares of coloured mosaic, after the manner of Pliny's doves. I could not doubt that this seat was intended for the king of the immortals, though at the present moment it was empty.

In the aisles to the right and left of the columns stood groups of divinities in conversation, while others were pacing up and down in pairs. The central portion of the hall, towards the inner side of the horse-shoe, seemed to be appropriated by the servants, who stood there motionless, under the charge of a head waiter or steward, in readiness to commence their duties at a given signal from the throne. They were all Satyrs, little encumbered with superfluous apparel; and from the neck of each was suspended the inevitable flute, attached by a silver chain.

All this, though it has supplied me with a useful page of padding, took but a few seconds

to fix itself upon my mind. (Strictly speaking, I believe that the tiny squares of the mosaic eagle were fixed at a later period, when I had been permitted to examine the work of art minutely from the front of the chair.) Indeed, no longer space than a few seconds was just now available; for I had scarcely entered the room, with my lively burden upon my back, when the gods and goddesses set up a simultaneous shout of welcome, clapping their hands and laughing with delight at the somewhat remarkable ingress which I had performed.

"Hadn't you better get down?" said I, seizing the boy's thighs and trying to shake him off my shoulders. "They may think me disrespectful, you know."

"Gammon!" answered Cupid; "they are not such fools. And I'll tell them it was all my fault. They never care a farthing what I do."

"Bravo!" cried a rough, wiry old man, with mottled cheeks and shaggy hair, and a beard which fell in grisly rags half-way down his body. "That's what I call Pegasus and Bellerophon topsy-turvy. The rider has wings, and the horse wears breeches! Bravo!"

"That's Neptune," explained Cupid, though I had guessed as much already. "He loves the English, because they are good on the water. You never need be afraid of *him*."

"Bless your heart!" said Neptune, "he knows

me well enough, even without my trident. We don't bring our attributes in to dinner, you know —except that little devil Cupid, and even *he* is not allowed to bring in his arrows. Well, sir!" added the old fellow, shaking me by the hand, "I'm downright glad to see you, *that* I am! I've been a true friend to your country for many and many a year, and helped your gallant seamen at a pinch, more times than I can remember. But that was in the good old-fashioned days, well-nigh a hundred years ago. You've got altogether beyond me now. Your ironclads, and torpedo-boats, and turrets beat me entirely. I don't understand neither the floating nor the sinking of 'em. I like a ship to look like a ship, and not like a hump-backed alligator."

"Welcome!" said a handsome but rather effeminate young man, who wore around his head a wreath of laurel—"welcome, O denizen of a lower world, to the abode of the celestials! You come from a country which, if not the land of music and song, is at least the generous patron of musicians and songsters."

"That's Apollo," said Cupid, kicking me with the side of his right foot.

"Any fool can see that!" I replied. "But, I say, *will* you just get off my back? This is becoming too ridiculous. How the deuce am I to make my bow to all these illustrious divinities with a great heavy boy upon my shoulders? I

swear, if you don't get off directly, I'll pitch you over my head on to the floor."

"You had better not," said Cupid. "If once you make an enemy of me, young fellow, you're done for!"

"Holloa!" exclaimed a distinctly masculine female, mature in point of summers, and imposing rather than beautiful in face and figure. There was a horsey look about this lady which aroused suspicion before she had advanced a step; but the bent knees and slightly stooping body, and rising of the feet upon their toes as she stepped forward to greet me, put her identity beyond all question. "Holloa, my boy! so you are tired of the old hunting grounds, are you, and have come farther afield? Well, we can show you some sport, in all seasons and all weathers. Big game and little game, furs and feathers, it's much the same to us. Glad to see you, my buck, and many a good run may we have together."

"That's Diana," said Cupid, kicking me again.

"What a d——d little idiot you must be," exclaimed I, losing patience, "to keep on telling me what any baby could see with its eyes shut! And now I'm going to chuck you off and have done with you. It's all very well with the gods —they may be good-natured enough to put up with it and excuse ceremony; but when it comes to being introduced to goddesses, why, that's a

different matter. Common decency demands that a gentleman should treat a lady with respect and make her a polite bow." So saying, I shifted my hands quickly from the boy's legs to his heels, bent my body forwards with a sudden jerk in the direction of the fair huntress, and laid my youthful rider at her feet.

Cupid was furious, and not altogether without good cause. In the first place, he had fallen badly upon a hard marble floor; in the second place, he had broken off a small cloud of pet feathers from his snow-white wings; in the third place, he was greeted on rising with an amount of chaff and chuckling which the most angelic of tempers would find it hard to bear. And Cupid's temper was not angelic by any means.

"I'll pay you out for that to-morrow morning!" said he, limping up to me and shaking his bow in my face. "You just wait till I get some arrows! I'll make you so mad, and so jealous, and so desperate that you'll wish you had never been born."

"Did it bruise its little knees and elbows," said Venus, "the pretty boy? Come to its Mummy, then, and she'll put a bit of plaster on, and kiss the place to make it well."

"Shall I run for Aesculapius?" asked Mercury. "He can't be far off. When I came across the courtyard he was writing a prescription in the

surgery for one of Diana's puppies, who has got the distemper."

"Aesculapius be hanged!" said Cupid, giving his knees a final rub and fixing a few distorted feathers in position. "I'm all right; but I'll have it out with Praxy."

"Praxy!" said a sunburnt, fierce, square-shouldered god, striding up to me with no very friendly gesture; "is that your name? It's the most ridiculous name I ever heard of. I wouldn't have such a name. My name is Mars—Mars, sir, at your service. You've heard of Mars, I suppose?"

"Indeed I have," replied I deferentially, "only too often."

"Too often?" repeated the god in a bullying tone. "What am I to understand by that? Do you mean to insult me, sir?"

"Not at all," said I, becoming alarmed, and wishing I had expressed the thing differently. "I merely meant—er—desolated hearths—er—devastating armies—er—horrors of war."

"Horrors of war!" echoed Mars, becoming purple with excitement. "I'll show you a horror or two. Will you fight, sir?"

"No, thank you," said I, receding a few steps as the warlike god squared up to me; "I would rather not. I should get very much the worst of it, and I am half dead with hunger."

"Bravo!" exclaimed a ruddy-faced youth,

planting himself between us. "Let him alone, Mars; you are always trying to pick a quarrel. Praxy is our guest, and he shan't be bullied. Hope you're thirsty as well as hungry," he continued, turning to me and pointing to his ivy crown. "I'm Bacchus, you know, and I keep the key of the wine-cellar."

At this moment the doleful concert of pipes was heard once more, and Cupid, who seemed by this time to have half forgiven my offence, ran up and took my hand.

"That's to tell us that the Jew's coming in," said he; "and now we shall get some dinner. I'll show you your place. You're to sit between me and Venus, at the farther end of the horse-shoe."

CHAPTER V.

CERBERUS ENJOYS HIS DINNER.

THE king of the gods suffered periodically from the gout, and this was one of his periods. On such occasions he could put neither left foot nor right foot to the ground without a roar, which the mortals far below would mistake for thunder, and which even the gods preferred to encounter at the distance of a geographical mile. When the door was flung open, therefore, at the upper end of the hall, through which the awful deity was to pass, it admitted—not, as I had expected, a towering figure from which all beholders would shrink with terror, but a rather common-looking old man, borne by four slaves in a black and yellow sedan-chair, between two long poles.

The process of getting the old gentleman out of this time-honoured conveyance was somewhat tedious, and the delay a source of no small anxiety to the expectant diners. For if anything went the least bit wrong the consequences might be appalling. Should even the tiniest of the monarch's toes come in contact with anything harder than a velvet cushion, a noise might follow which would clear the whole dinner-table of its

crockery and glass, and quite conceivably cause to totter in their bases the very columns of the banquet hall. As for the company and the attendant Satyrs, if the drums of their ears were not broken beyond all possibility of repair, at the very least they would be deafened upon the spot, and rendered incapable of carrying on an audible conversation for several weeks to come.

As good luck would have it, however, nothing went wrong at all. The transfer from the sedan-chair to the marble throne was managed without the slightest hitch, and the deity himself looked all the better for the change. A sedan-chair does not confer dignity upon its inmate. The jerky up-and-down motion which the patient must needs undergo is fatal to all assumption either of importance or ease; while the bystander is never quite able to look with reverence on a magnate who is so obviously at his bearers' mercy, that it is impossible to avoid the contemplation of his ultimate deposition in the nearest pond.

Seated upon a marble throne, on the other hand, especially if an imperial eagle be inlaid or sculptured at the back of it, a man of average presence has an even chance of making people believe that he is somebody; and Jupiter, as he presided at the horse-shoe table, with his noble head of iron-grey hair, his flashing eye, his finely cut majestic features, and his flowing beard, looked every inch the Jupiter of my mythological dreams.

Behind him stood the four slaves who had carried the monarch into the saloon, while on a stool at his right hand sat my youthful friend the cup-bearer, in readiness to do his office at a sign from his royal master. Ganymede still wore his knickerbocker suit, Jupiter having taken a fancy to it; and beyond all doubt, in spite of our present idolatry of the public school uniform, it is by many degrees the most becoming dress which any boy can wear. A lad of twelve or fourteen who can look well in a pair of baggy pepper-and-salt trousers, short tight jacket, ill-fitting lumpy collar, and chimney-pot or saucepan hat, must be endowed by Nature with such transcendent gifts of person that he would look well in anything. We laugh at the tyranny which forces French and Italian boys to strut about in uniform like pigmy soldiers. Surely the tyranny of a *civil* uniform is just as bad.

"Come along!" said Cupid, still holding my hand; "before we begin dinner you must be presented to the Jew."

"Shall I kneel to him," I enquired, "and kiss his hand?"

"I think he would take it kindly," was the reply; "but, for goodness gracious' sake, don't kiss his toes. He wouldn't take that kindly at all; he'd raise a yell that would send us all to perdition. Though, for the matter of that, you

can't get at them, for they're tucked well under the table."

So saying, he led me round the horse-shoe to the left elbow of the throne, beside which I sank upon my knees and bent my head submissively. I felt very much as if it were going to be cut off, and wished I had courage to raise my eyes, lest the blow should fall instanter. It would be satisfatory at any rate to have a moment's warning, so that one might offer up some sort of prayer. But I was positively in such a blessed funk that I did not dare look up at anybody.

"It's Praxy, my lord," said Cupid; "the fellow that Ganny brought up from the Piræus on the eagle's back—and a jolly good fellow, too."

Jupiter smiled. "Is that the way you present a mortal to the King of Olympus?" he asked, pinching the boy's cheek affectionately. "Why didn't Mercury come forward and make a proper speech of introduction, worthy of our presence, and of the illustrious guest whom we are entertaining?"

"Because Mercury is so precious long-winded," answered the lad, "and while he was boring your Majesty to death the soup would be getting cold. I knew your Majesty was hungry, so I thought the fewer words the better. Praxy wants to kiss your hand, my lord, and then he wants his dinner."

"Let the mortal rise," said Jupiter, holding out his left hand, upon which I pressed my lips with due respectfulness. It was a hard, cold hand, divinely shaped, of course, but with a texture of bronze, and a cruel crunching look about the fingers.

The mortal rose accordingly, rejoicing at his release, and was conducted to his seat at the left end of the horse-shoe.

"You mustn't sit down yet," said Cupid; "Mercury is going to say grace. But he won't be long about it, after the broad hint I gave him just now."

Jupiter raised his awful right hand, and the entire company stood up in silence, each one at the back of his own chair. Mercury mumbled a few words which I could not catch, and was proceeding to mumble a good many more, when the awful hand struck the table, and the grace was over.

"It's an invocation to Ceres and Bacchus," explained Cupid, "and he is obliged to say something different every evening. If ever he repeats himself he goes without his dinner. But Bacchus came off second best this time, for his name was scarcely out of Mercury's mouth when the Jew cut the whole thing short, more power to him! I hope the merry god won't take it amiss and knock off the liquor."

The Satyrs now bustled about their work, and

we all fell to. The steward stood at a small side-table ladling out the soup, which was handed to the guests from the concave of the horse-shoe. To this succeeded fish, in orthodox terrestrial fashion; and although the creature was of a shape and colour which I do not remember having seen before, I never wish to eat a better. Conversation flagged while appetite enforced its claims, and there was practically a dead silence during the first two courses. A dead silence at dinner has always struck me as intolerably oppressive, and even in the dread company of the gods I could not resist the impulse to break it.

"I thought you people—I beg your pardon," said I—"I thought you sublime divinities only ate *ambrosia*."

"Ha, ha, ha!" burst out Jupiter, with a roar which upset every drinking-cup on the table. No wine was spilt, however, none having yet been served.

"That's the reason we don't drink out of glass," observed Cupid, in a half-whisper, putting his head close to mine; "it would all get smashed in no time. Do you see those little round trays hung by chains from the ceiling? There's one within reach of everybody."

"Yes," said I, "I see them. What are they meant for?"

"Why, sometimes he sulks, you know, and never opens his mouth except to eat his food,

and then we can safely keep our goblets on the table. But when he's lively, as he appears to be to-night, we stick them up *there*. If he makes a row, the chain vibrates for a minute or two, and the tray swings gently up and down, but the cup stands firm. Put yours up presently, when you get the chance; but don't do it while the Jew's looking at you; it makes him savage."

I took the earliest opportunity of adopting this wise precaution, and I noticed that my example was very generally followed. The act was, however, invariably performed by stealth, in a sort of absent manner, while Jupiter happened to be busy with his knife and fork, or looking the other way.

"Who told you that fool's nonsense?" asked Mars, turning fiercely round at me. "It's positively insulting."

"Shut up, Spears and Battle-axes!" said Jupiter. "I won't have the mortal bullied. If you want to fight, go out and have a round with Hercules. We shan't miss you."

"I read it first," said I, "in Keightley's Mythology, when I was a boy at school, and I never heard it contradicted. Everybody in the lower world believes it. But I shall have a different story to tell when I go back to my own diggings."

"Ambrosia is bear's grease," said Vulcan; "we put it on our hair."

"Speak for yourself, you ruffian!" said Juno. "*I* don't put anything of the sort. I put Macassar oil."

"And plenty of it," observed Venus, standing up for her spouse—"enough to grease a cart-wheel."

"Or a blacksmith's bellows," retorted Juno.

"Come, come!" said Minerva; "these recriminations are unwise. And when we have satisfied our hunger with this curious comestible, what are we supposed to take after it, sir, by way of washing it down?"

"Nectar, madam."

"That's the stuff I give to Cerberus," said Pluto, "when he's got the worms. You haven't seen my dog Cerberus, have you, sir?"

"No," said I, with a shudder, curiosity giving way to a dread of everlasting nightmares; "and, if you don't mind, I'd just as soon I didn't."

"We'll have him in presently," said Pluto, "when there are some bones going. At this early stage of dinner there are no scraps handy for the poor beggar to eat."

"I suppose he gets through a pretty big plateful," observed I, "with three mouths to feed?"

"I believe you," was the reply—"most expensive animal. But there is generally enough for him, except when Diana brings in one of her pet

greyhounds, who puts my beast's three noses out of joint."

As a pleasing diversion to this topic, a choir of boys and rural deities now began to sing glees and madrigals from a low gallery at the other end of the hall; and lovelier vocal music I never heard.

"Glass of wine, sir?" said Bacchus, filling his goblet at the termination of the first glee, and sending a Satyr with a jug of liquor to my end of the table.

"With the greatest pleasure," I returned; and we drank each other's health most cordially.

"Is that bin to your liking, sir?" continued the jovial god. "If not, we'll try another."

"Excellent," said I; and then we had a general drink all round, in which everybody joined, except Vesta, who is a total abstainer.

The dinner consisted chiefly of made dishes, the only joint being roast kid, which was garnished with cream-cheese and honey. Cupid told me the name of every course as it appeared; but I thought it would look rude to make notes at table, and there was unfortunately no *menu*. If there had been one, I would have brought it away with me, and forwarded it with much pleasure to the *chef* at the Criterion. I could only detect one flaw in the perfection of the cookery. The gods are fond of garlic, and the salad was uneatable.

While the roast kid was being consumed, Pluto

sent a message across to Jupiter, who nodded almost imperceptibly in return. Cupid, who followed everything with his roguish eyes, nudged me on the elbow.

"Did you see that?" asked the boy. "If he had nodded his head a little lower, there'd have been an earthquake, and the roof would have fallen in."

"This appears to be rather a dangerous sort of old gentleman," I observed, whispering back again. "I don't mind telling you in confidence that I shan't be sorry when he leaves the room."

"He won't leave it yet awhile," was the reply. "He'll stow away another gallon or so of wine before he goes; and when he's three parts screwed, a lot of us will fall upon him and badger him into giving his consent to this personally conducted tour."

Meanwhile the Satyr who took Pluto's message had left the hall, leaving the door open behind him. After a short interval I heard the rattling of a heavy chain, and then Pluto whistled. A moment afterwards there came a scamper and a shuffling of feet, and the most ungainly monster that ever tormented St. Anthony in his wildest dreams rushed like a hurricane into the room.

"There!" said Pluto, as the creature came sniffing round the table on the look-out for bones. "I dare say you never saw a dog with three heads before. Fine beast, isn't he?"

I knew it would not do to faint; so I made a tremendous effort, and pulled myself together. Cupid, who saw that I was as pale as a ghost, considerately had my goblet filled with wine, and made me drink off a bumper. I had scarcely done so, when the stimulating powers of the liquor were put pretty severely to the test. In his progress from seat to seat, the dog wedged himself in between myself and my young neighbour, giving a lateral head to each, and seizing with his central set of teeth the leg of an unfortunate little kid off which I had just been dining.

I drew back my hand with horror, and the brute snapped savagely, but by great good luck just missed me. Cupid meanwhile was trying to put the beast into a good humour by caressing the head in his possession; an effort to which it responded with a whine. It was so perfectly horrible to see three heads on one body all going at once, and each one differently employed, that I could stand the thing no longer. My own head tottered on my shoulders, and finally fell over into the lap of Venus, who sat by my right side.

"Call him off, Pluto," said Venus, lifting me up; "it's too much for the poor fellow. Cerby is a little rough, you know, at times."

Pluto good-naturedly complied, and banished his favourite to the inner side of the horse-shoe, where he was accommodated with a huge pile of

bones. I hastened to apologise for my weakness, assuring the god that I had already conceived a strong affection for Cerberus, but found some little difficulty in patting three heads at a time with equally distributed favour.

"Might I ask," I continued, by way of displaying as much concern in the animal as possible, "what he is doing up here at all? I thought he was supposed to be on guard at the gates of Hades."

"So he is," was the reply; "but just now, you see, he's on leave. A dog may have a holiday, I imagine, as well as his betters. And he has left his snakes behind him. They do pretty well."

"Pity," I rejoined, wishing to be civil; "I should like to have seen the snakes." And as I looked across at the monster, crunching the bones with his hideous jaws, each one in a different phase of distortion, I felt persuaded that the additional embellishment of a couple of snakes entwined round his body would have finished me then and there.

CHAPTER VI.

JUPITER ISSUES A DECREE.

THE dinner ran its course as dinners usually do, the scale of conviviality going up as the liquor went down. Bacchus tapped his oldest cask in my honour, and gods and goddesses vied with each other in doing justice to the cheer. I was perfectly astounded at the amount which even the ladies could put away, and apparently without fear of penalties. Their cheeks were not pimply, neither were their voices hoarse, nor their eyes bloodshot, nor their noses purple. Venus herself, on whose left hand I enjoyed the distinction of being placed, had filled three goblets to my one, and emptied them with transparent satisfaction; and yet she would wake in the morning without a "head," and look as beautiful as ever. Even Cupid, a little imp not fourteen years of age, had disposed of two gallons at the least, and was as bright and boyish as if he never tasted anything stronger than toast and water. And when I considered that they had done the same thing every day of their lives for several thousand years, I

realised, as I had never done before, the deplorable weakness of mortality.

Cerberus also, having made ruthless havoc with his heap of bones, began to show symptoms of thirst, and raised his central head appealingly to his master. A sound as of many garglers was emitted from the creature's throat, and it would have been hard to misunderstand his meaning. Pluto at any rate understood it well enough, and caused his favourite to be supplied with a pail of water. The Satyr who brought it was for taking away the plate of bones, under the impression that the beast's hunger was appeased; but Cerberus knew better. He gave a growl which put the Satyr to speedy flight, and fell upon his food with renewed voracity. I shall never forget the five minutes which then ensued. To see the head on the right lapping water noisily from a bucket, and the head on the left devouring bones, while the head in the centre barked defiance at the retreating Satyr, was a feat of canine dexterity which will come back to me, I fear, in many a troubled dream.

"I do wish you'd get that beast sent back to his kennel, or, better still, to hell," said I, in an undertone, to Cupid. "It makes me almost sick to look at him."

"I will, as soon as he has done feeding," was the reply. "But look out—here comes Ganny."

Turning my head, I saw that the boy was

walking towards me, bearing a golden cup full to the very brim. "Jupiter wants to take wine with you," said he. "You must stand up clear of your chair, and bow, and then drain the goblet at one draught, and I'll come again and fetch it. Mind you do exactly as I tell you, or there'll be a scrimmage. I must go back now and fill the cup for Jupiter. And I say, Q," continued he, advancing another step, and speaking in a hurried whisper, "the Jew's been drinking like a fish, so if you've any business to do with him, you'd better come and do it straight away, while the old man's capable. In another twenty minutes he may be too far gone."

It was all very well to say, "Stand up clear of your chair," but I was by no means certain that I could do it. I had already drunk so much that although my head was clear enough for purposes of rational conversation, my legs felt stiff and groggy; and a sudden rise to the feet, in the midst of a jovial gathering, is seldom achieved with perfect steadiness of posture. Besides, that beastly dog had upset me altogether, and I was fitter to go to bed than to stand erect and drink off a solemn pint of wine. However, I went through the ordeal as best I could, and gave apparent satisfaction; for Jupiter bestowed upon me an affectionate, not to say drunken, smile, and the company greeted the exchange of toasts with a round of uproarious cheering which I thought

would never end. Gratifying as I felt the compliment to be, its effect was somewhat marred by the performance of a three-part solo on the musical jaws of Cerberus as the last echoes of the chorus were dying away. The brute raised all three heads together in the air, and delivered himself of a horribly discordant howl which seemed to express the agonies of ten thousand souls in torment, and was probably a well-studied imitation of their groans. This was the last of his exploits; for even the gods set limits to their patience, and Jupiter ordered him to be expelled.

The question was, who should expel him? Ten Satyrs would not have got him out, three to each head, and one to push behind. Pluto was trying to coax or threaten the beast into tractability, when Jupiter swore he would have no more fuss about the matter, and summarily commanded Pluto to retire, and take his cursed dog with him. This was the signal for a general break-up. Juno strolled into the garden to feed her peacocks, and Ceres went to settle with the housekeeper for last week's supply of flour. Vesta struck a light and led the way to the library, where Minerva consulted ancient authorities on the relation between the signs of the zodiac and the hooting of owls. Vulcan limped out to his forge, where Castor and Pollux were waiting impatiently to have their horses shod, before starting on their customary midnight ride. Bacchus was carried off to bed,

singing incoherently, and brandishing a leathern bottle in the air; Mars, to my great relief, went off to make preparations for a cock-fight which he was going to superintend next day; while the rest of the deities adjourned to the skittle-ground, and swore and cheated and squabbled over their game until the small hours of the morning.

"Why the devil didn't you come before?" shouted Castor angrily, as Vulcan hobbled into the forge. "We've been standing here an hour or more. What's the use of keeping a black-smith's shop if you don't attend to business? If you're above your work, better say so, and retire from the trade, and strut about Olympus like a gentleman."

"Precious little strutting to be done with a game leg," observed Pollux. "Now, just look sharp, will you, and shoe these horses!"

"I shan't shoe your horses," said Vulcan; "I'll see you shod yourselves first. And for two pins I'd shoe the both of you with red-hot nails. I'm not bound to slave for a couple of demi-gods who came out of a broken egg-shell."

"What, quarrelling!" exclaimed Mars, as he swaggered into the forge on his way home—"that's very sad. Birds in their little nests agree, you know. Better tell me all about it. I'm the man to make up differences."

"Why, Vulcan won't shoe our horses," said the twins, speaking together.

"Then Vulcan shall fight Castor," said Mars, "and the man who comes off best shall fight Pollux, and I'll fight the winner."

"A-a-all the winnaws!" cried Bacchus, whose small procession was passing by. "Take me in there, boys, and put me down by the fire. We won't go home till morning—we won't go home till morning!" But whether the fight came off, and how it ended, and what time they all got home, must be left to the imagination of the reader, for our business is with the gods and oddesses in the dining-hall.

"Now's the time!" cried Cupid, springing off his seat; "there's nobody left but the would-be personally conducted. Let's go at him while we have the chance, and get the whole thing arranged."

So saying, he took my hand and led me to the throne, the five remaining deities following in groups of two and three.

"You don't walk very straight, Praxy," said the boy, in a chaffing tone, as I involuntarily reeled the least little bit against his shoulder; "and yet you haven't drunk a third part as much as I have. But whatever you do, don't tread on the tip of my wings, or you'll smash a lot more feathers, and they're terribly out of joint already. That was a wicked spill you gave me before dinner, Praxy!"

"I am so tremendously sorry," said I; "please

forgive me. If you and I are not good friends, I don't know what ever I shall do. You'll make it up, won't you?"

"O lor', yes!" replied he; "I've forgiven you long ago. But you mustn't raise any difficulties about the tour, or we shall fall out in earnest."

By this time we had all placed ourselves in position—Venus, Neptune, and Apollo on the right of the chair; Diana, Mercury, and Cupid on the left. Ganymede stood a little in the background behind the former group, while I established myself on a similar spot behind the latter, and exchanged grins with the young cup-bearer. I was not so terribly frightened as I had been a couple of hours ago. Possibly the juice of the grape had given me courage.

"And what's all this tomfoolery about?" growled Jupiter, waking up from a semi-inebriate doze.

"We want you to let us go away for a little change of air," began Venus. "We are none of us feeling very well."

"Not feeling very well? Send for Aesculapius, then. If he does not make you all well in less than a week, he shall drink a quart of black draught before breakfast every morning for a hundred years."

"It would serve him jolly well right," said Cupid, "for he's a very one-horse practitioner.

He can't even cure the gout that has settled in his Majesty's imperial toes."

"Does his Majesty suffer from gout?" I timidly inquired.

"Yes, he does," replied Jupiter, "and he has got a twinge upon him now. Do you know of anything that is good for it, O square-coated mortal?"

"Several things, my lord. Eno's Fruit Salt, taken in minute doses, is said to be very good indeed. So is Dinneford's Fluid Magnesia."

"Has the mortal got any of these drugs in one of his capacious pockets?" asked the cloud-compeller.

"No, my lord; but I could send you half-a-dozen bottles of each if your Majesty would provide the means of transport."

"Fetch round the eagle at once, boy," said the deity, turning to his favourite, "and take the mortal back to the lower world again, and bring me up the bottles."

Ganymede left the room that instant, for obedience is prompt when the king of the gods commands. Personally, I was well pleased at the turn which things were taking. I would gladly have washed my hands of the personally conducted tour, and did not care to hear the project discussed at all; but I was really anxious to get back to the Piraeus by office hours on Monday morning. There was just time to do it if we started pretty soon.

Venus and Cupid, however, did not like the turn which things were taking at all. They looked first at one another, and then at me—the boy turning round and fixing his great eyes upon me with such an imploring gaze, that I swore solemnly to myself I would stand by him.

"Minute doses of fruit salt seven times a day, my lord, and a wine-glassful of fluid magnesia half-an-hour before every meal. No gout can stand against that. It all comes from the liver."

"And what boon does the mortal ask in return for this service?" demanded Jupiter, who appeared to have shaken off entirely the effects of his deep potations at the prospect of relief from his pains. "Would he like a situation as demi-god to mix drugs for Aesculapius, or get up speeches for Mercury, or play second fiddle to Apollo?"

"Your Majesty does me too great an honour," I replied, pinching myself in the leg to subdue a rising smile. "For neither of those exalted functions is your servant qualified. But if I am permitted to ask a boon, I would humbly beseech your Majesty to grant the petition lately brought by the Queen of Love and Beauty, and concede to the illustrious deities here present three months' leave of absence, in order that they may visit Central Europe on a personally conducted tour."

"The boon is granted, O gout-dispelling

mortal!" said the monarch, making a face; "for another twinge has caught me, and to him who will rid me of this enemy can I refuse nothing. But which are they," he added, addressing himself to Venus—"which are they who desire to go?"

"The six now present, your Majesty, together with Mars and Bacchus."

"I won't go with Mars," said I, straight out. "Nothing shall induce me. With all due respect to any of his august relations who may happen to be present, he is a bumptious, disagreeable fellow."

"But we poor women must have some strong man to defend us," objected Venus. "Neither Mercury, nor Bacchus, nor Apollo are any good for fighting."

"Let us take Hercules, then," suggested Diana.

"He's only a demi-god," said Apollo.

"A demi-semi-god will do very well for that sort of work," rejoined his sister, "and he is more likely to be obsequious in our service."

"Then that's the lot, your Majesty," said Cupid—"present company, with Bacchus and Hercules. Praxy goes with us to put us through, and we all meet at the Piraeus—when shall we say?—to-morrow evening?"

I could not help smiling at the boy's innocent impetuosity. "There are three quite unimportant questions of a practical nature which deserve a

few minutes' consideration," I observed. "In the first place, how do you propose to get down there? In the second place, what do you ladies and gentlemen intend to wear? In the third place, who is going to find the money? That such ridiculously trifling obstacles as these can be easily removed, I make no doubt whatever; but I fear they can hardly be removed by this time to-morrow evening."

"Quite so," assented Jupiter; "and there is another difficulty yet, which I will reserve until the three under discussion have been dealt with."

"As for getting down there," said Cupid, "there's the eagle."

"The eagle can't take eight of us," said Diana. "Two at a time is the very most he can manage, and he won't fly a yard without Ganymede. So we should want eight days to get down, anyhow."

"Only six," said Mercury. "Cupid and I can go on our own wings."

"No, you can't," said Jupiter, with a grim smile. "Oh, it's no good looking incredulous. I'll tell you the reason presently. And how about the clothes? You can't go dressed as you are, you know."

"Mercury must cut down and steal them," said Apollo.

"Good!" assented Jupiter; "but that can't be done by to-morrow evening. And how about the money?"

"Mercury must steal that too."

"This is all very fine, illustrious gods and goddesses," I observed; "but if there is any stealing to be done, I beg that it may be done before I am placed in charge of the party. I have no fancy to be locked up for six or eight months, with hard labour to boot, because I am found travelling with divinities who have helped themselves at a ready-made clothes shop, and broken into the strong-room of some bank at Athens."

"How much will the expedition cost, O personally conducting mortal?" asked Jupiter, after a short but significant pause. The deities were clearly puzzled on the question of ways and means. As for myself, the whole scheme had appeared to me from the first so absolutely foolish, that I was unprepared with even the roughest estimate of the probable expense in the roundest numbers.

"Let me see," said I to myself—"ninety days for nine persons at a pound a day—that's eight hundred and ten—say a thousand pounds. It doesn't leave me much for myself; but as the thing will never come off, it makes very little difference. On the whole, I think I'll stick it on a bit, and say fifteen hundred."

"Fifteen hundred pounds sterling, my lord—three months' tour, Olympus and back, all expenses included, except clothes," I added.

"Ladies and gentlemen will of course provide themselves with a sufficient wardrobe; but the less luggage, when the demands of modern propriety have been satisfied, the better."

"Good again!" said Jupiter. "I decree therefore," he continued, "supposing that you persist in your desire to travel when I have announced the difficulty of which I spoke just now—I decree first that no further word shall be uttered in this presence, and that nothing shall be afterwards revealed to the personally conducting mortal, as to the means by which either the clothes or the money have been procured. Our imperial treasury shall provide both the one and the other, and the conscience of the mortal may rest at ease. Secondly, I decree that as soon as Ganymede has fed and groomed his eagle, the mortal shall be conveyed in safety to his home, the boy bringing back the bottles which are to cure my gout, upon his return, with the least possible delay. Thirdly, I decree that on the seventh day from this the personally conducted party shall meet the pocket-laden mortal at his rooms in the lower world, delivering themselves then and there into his charge, and that Mercury shall pay to the said mortal the sum of fifteen hundred pounds in full of all demands, as a satisfaction for liberal treatment and abundant pleasure during the three months' tour. I have decreed. Shall I nod my head in confirmation?"

"Oh, don't!" cried all the deities in a breath, falling upon their knees. "We implore your Majesty to spare us! The decree needs no confirmation! We implicitly obey!"

"Good once more!" said the monarch, with a gracious smile. "But here comes Ganymede. Has the eagle dined?" he asked, turning to his cupbearer.

"Yes, my lord," answered the boy, passing the back of his hand horizontally across his mouth, with an expressive gesture, "and so have I; and if Praxy is ready, off we go."

"In a very few minutes," resumed Jupiter, "he shall be released. But I wish him to be present while I explain certain apparently unforeseen conditions upon which the personally conducted tour must be undertaken. In this blissful but circumscribed retreat I reign supreme; and the eleven divinities who assist me with their counsel wield authority, each one in the department over which he presides. But on earth we rule no longer. The lightning which once I hurled in this awful hand, striking rebellious giants to their death, now runs harmlessly down a metal rod beside a temple in which my kingdom is defied, and is impudently manufactured by the mortals themselves for illuminating their streets and houses. My name, once so terrible, commands no more respect than any other name, and men swear by Jove as they swear by Jingo. In the war department the

dread avenger Mars serves as a mere stuffed specimen of the soldier as he used to be. Men fight no longer hand to hand, but blow each other up with powder. In the naval department Father Neptune stands, trident in hand, upon the rocky shore, a picturesque but rather ridiculous old fossil. His wind-blown fleets sail timidly over the sea, ever on the look-out lest some big screw-steamer should run them down. In the love department our Queen of Beauty and her charming Boy still rule over the hearts of men; but their sway must be exercised with caution, or the police will interfere. The little god may shoot his arrows from invisible heights, and wound, or even kill, his victim; but should he ply his weapons visibly in the lower world, I may probably hear some day that he has been hung for murder. If therefore we celestials descend once more upon the earth, we go there not as gods, but as men. Mercury must walk on his legs like any other man, and Cupid like any other boy. Diana can no longer rule the night, and shoot with unerring aim; or Apollo, except in some chance moment of divine inspiration, hold all his listeners spell-bound as he twangs the lyre. Such, my children, are the fixed conditions upon which your contemplated journey must be undertaken, and even I cannot alter them. This much only can I do: I can supply the needful, and I can plant your footsteps safely upon the earth. But when once there,

you must shift for yourselves; and if you get into any scrapes with the mortals, you must get out of them as best you can."

"Hercules will get us out of them," said Apollo. "He'll stand no nonsense from anybody."

"We shall see," observed Jupiter. "Meanwhile, am I to understand that you still wish to be personally conducted?"

"I vote we go!" exclaimed Cupid. "It'll be rattling fun; and I'll get some shooting somehow or other, if they hang me for it."

"And I'll send all the women stark mad with jealousy," said Venus, "and the men with love."

"And I'll show them the way across country," said Diana.

"And I'll fiddle their heads off," said Apollo.

"And I'll crib a thing or two when no one is looking," said Mercury.

"And I'll stand on the bridge of the steamer," said Neptune, "and let the captain know I'm there."

"Then it's settled," said Jupiter; "you choose to make fools of yourselves, and you shall. Let the mortal be served with another cup of wine, and we will all drink success to the Personally Conducted Tour."

CHAPTER VII.

MERCURY GOES OUT SHOPPING.

THE eagle recognised me as an old acquaintance, and shook his wings by way of salutation. This time I managed to climb upon his back more cleverly, and secured a position so comfortable that I could almost have gone to sleep but for the fear of falling. I had not slept a wink since Friday night, and I longed to be in bed again.

"Shall we arrive pretty early in the morning?" I enquired, as Ganymede hoisted himself up alongside of me. "I ought to be at the office by nine o'clock to let the clerks in."

"Long before that," was the reply. "It wouldn't be safe to land by daylight, for fear somebody should see the eagle. We must get down to that shed by half-past five at the latest, and put up the old bird, and then walk on."

I contrived to keep awake, by dint of repeated pinchings from my companion, and the ride was accomplished without misadventure. It was a profound relief to see the lights of Athens once more; but the moment they came in sight I felt the necessity of closing my eyes, lest the sensa-

tion of great height above the earth should turn me giddy.

"Here we are!" cried Ganymede at last, as the eagle poised himself in the air before making his final swoop upon the ground. Luckily the shed was empty, and the door unfastened; so we got in without any trouble, and arranged a snug corner for the bird of prey. I was so desperately tired that I sank down at once upon the turf and went to sleep, the boy soon afterwards following my example.

After three hours of delicious slumber I was roused by Ganymede, who said it was high time to go. The clever lad had discovered the door-key hanging upon a nail, so we were able to lock the door, and secure the bird from molestation. We then started off across the field, reaching the office at a few minutes before nine.

Having let in my two clerks, and seen them fairly settled at their desks, I sallied forth with my young companion to get some coffee, and to order the fruit salt and fluid magnesia for his gouty master. It had to be fetched from Athens, but the people promised to let us have it in good time.

"You can't possibly go back until the evening," said I to Ganymede; "so you had better come to my rooms, and lie down until luncheon time. In the afternoon you can take the tramway to Athens if you like, while I am at work in the

office, and we will dine together afterwards. We can carry the bottles between us to the shed, and as soon as it is tolerably dark you can be off again."

My landlady had of course been much perplexed at my absence, and I fear I told her a great many shocking lies. Fortunately no one had called on Sunday, and my strange behaviour was not therefore likely to be a subject of remark among the gossips of our small English colony.

Ganymede and I had become such friends that the boy appeared really sorry to leave me; and I believe he would gladly have stayed at Athens for a year or so, had such a thing been possible, and enjoyed the fun of going to a day-school.

I gave him my photograph, and a ring, which he promised to wear for ever, in remembrance of our two eventful rides. Unfortunately I never thought about having his own likeness taken until it was too dark, or I would have prefixed a copy of it as a curiosity to this veracious volume.

"I wish I had something to give you!" said Ganymede, as he sat fingering and admiring his new ring after dinner.

"What is this thing hanging round your neck?" I asked, drawing up to his throat a short chain of silver thread, at the end of which were fastened

two little flat polished stones about the size of almonds.

"My mother gave me those," said Ganymede. "They were part of the setting of my father's crown, and she said they were of enormous value, but I never could find out why. Anyhow, I don't want them both, so I'll give one of them to you. I'm so very glad you noticed them. They're exactly alike, you see."

We had some little difficulty in detaching the stone, but we got it off at last, and I promised to wear it always round my neck, just as he wore its fellow. As soon as it was dark enough we made our way across the field to the shed where we had left the eagle; but I need hardly say that Ganymede had visited his favourite more than once in the course of the day, to give it food and water.

The boy almost cried as he mounted with his bottles on the eagle's back, and we said good-bye a dozen times while he rose slowly in the air. But he soon passed out of sight, and soon afterwards out of even shouting distance, and I could hear nothing but a strong, swift beating of wings as the bird soared upwards into the sky.

I went back to my rooms to get a good night's rest, and in the morning resumed my office work, unable, however, to think seriously of anything else except my remarkable adventure. The days

wore on, and the week drew near to its close, and I remembered that on this very Saturday evening the eight immortals were to present themselves at my office door. In spite of my firm persuasion that they would never come, I found myself strolling down after dinner to the Piazza, round which I sauntered pensively in the cool spring air for upwards of an hour.

"What a fool I am!" said I to myself, turning at last to go home again. "What a fool I am to think of keeping such an insane appointment as this! Why, of course I shall never set eyes on anyone of them again."

I had scarcely finished muttering the words, when I set eyes on all the eight together. The miserable street-lamp did not enable me to make out clearly which was which; but I recognised Cupid at a glance, and a huge square-shouldered figure in the background must of necessity be Hercules, whom I had not seen before.

"Run you to earth at last, old fox!" said Diana, coming forward and slapping me on the shoulder, while the others shook me cordially by the hand.

"Delighted to see you all!" I exclaimed, not feeling quite satisfied that the expression was sincere. "Won't you come into my little den and sit down for a few minutes? It's close by." So I led the way to the office, let everybody in, lighted my lamp, and found chairs enough for all

my guests except Cupid, who made himself very much at home upon the table.

"Will you take anything after your walk, ladies and gentlemen?" I continued. "There is no kitchen or cellar on the spot, you know, because I only come here to do my work, and live elsewhere; but to the extent of a biscuit and a glass of claret or Madeira, or even a brandy and soda, I can always accommodate my friends."

"I should like a brandy very much," said Bacchus.

"And I should like a soda," said Apollo.

"And I should like a mixture of both," said Cupid. "I say, Praxy, what a remarkably amiable person you are!"

By way of continuing to merit so flattering an opinion, I fished out bottles and decanters and glasses and biscuit-tins, and made as hospitable a display of good things as my limited resources would allow. It is only fair to admit that the contents of my poor little cupboard were to the full appreciated. In fifteen minutes at the most my divine guests had cleaned me out, leaving neither biscuit in its tin nor drop of liquor in its bottle. When the last of the Huntley and Palmers had been devoured, Cupid carefully abstracted all the paper lining from the tin, so as to give himself fair play, coaxed the remaining crumbs into a corner, emptied them into the hollow of his left hand, and took them up dexterously with his

tongue. After this marvellous exhibition of all-round voracity, I could only hazard the conclusion that my distinguished visitors had not dined.

"Got any more biscuits, Praxy?" asked Cupid, brushing off a few stray crumbs which had lingered on his chin. The boy wore a knicker-bocker suit with tasteful distribution of colour, and looked just as incorrigible a young rogue as he had done in his wings at Olympus.

"Very sorry," I replied, "but upon my word I haven't; and the shops are all shut, or I would send for some."

"That was very good stuff," said Bacchus, "which came out of the last bottle. I shouldn't mind if I did it again."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, I assure you, than to pour you out another tumbler-ful; only unluckily, you see, it's all gone. I hope, ladies and gentlemen," I continued, rather anxious that the subject should be changed—"I hope you had a pleasant journey from the clouds."

"Very indeed, thank you," answered Venus; "enjoyed it extremely."

"Did you come by—a—I mean—a——?"

"Yes, Praxy, we all know what you mean well enough. You mean to try and find out how we came down. And you're not to know anything at all about it—the Jew told you so. We came by the limited express, Praxy, and we're going back the same way; so now you've got your answer."

"The boy's quite right," said Venus; "there are to be no questions asked on this subject at all, and there will certainly be no answers given."

"It is a matter of supreme indifference to me which way you came," I replied. "Have you taken your rooms for the night at one of the hotels in Athens?"

"No," answered Neptune; "we left that to you. Which hotel do you recommend?"

"Well," I replied, "there's the *Grande Bretagne,* and there's the *Angleterre*—both about equally good, as far as I know. Only you must be off at once, or you'll miss the last train."

"And which is the least expensive?" asked Mercury.

"One is much the same as the other," answered I; "but in the present case expense is no great object. By the by, you were to hand me over some money, I believe."

"Ah, yes, to be sure! The Jew did say something about it," said Mercury, looking a little bothered.

"He said a good deal about it," I rejoined. "He announced distinctly—he 'decreed,' in fact (whatever that may mean)—that you were to pay me down fifteen hundred pounds in advance, this very evening."

"Fifteen hundred pounds is a very large sum of money," observed Neptune.

"True," I said; "but an agreement is an agreement. However, I am not particularly anxious about the entire payment in advance. I should certainly like a part of it before any arrangements are made."

"But it unluckily happens, don't you see," said Mercury, "that I haven't brought it with me."

"Perhaps you could send for it?" suggested I.

"Send where?"

"To the place where you left it, or to the person who is taking care of it for you."

"But there's no such place, don't you see, and no such person. The fact is, my dear Praxy, we haven't got any money at all."

"Haven't got any money at all!" repeated I, in profound astonishment.

"No; we couldn't get any, and that's the truth. I got the clothes all right; that was easy enough——"

"Now, Mercury," interrupted Diana, "be careful what you're saying."

"Yes, I know. Well, the clothes were easy enough, you see; but when it came to breaking——"

"What an idiot you are!" cried Venus. "Do hold your tongue! God of eloquence, indeed! Why, for the last ten minutes you've done nothing but stutter."

"Well," resumed Mercury, "the long and short

of it is, that we haven't got a brass farthing between the lot of us; so there!"

"In that case," said I, with cold politeness, thinking of my empty tins and bottles—"in that case I almost wonder that you did me the honour to call upon me at this somewhat late hour of the evening."

"That's just the reason why we came, Praxy," said Cupid; "we wanted you to put us up somewhere."

"Put you up somewhere! How upon earth am I to get eight people put up anywhere, who haven't got a brass farthing between them? There's no hotel at Athens, or the Piraeus either, that would take you in, and *I* can't house you. I won't turn you out into the street; you can sleep here for a night on the office floor, if you'll promise to go back to heaven in the morning. But that's the most I can do for you." And I began to pitch the empty bottles and biscuit-tins into the cupboard, by way of letting off steam. A pretty trick these beggarly Olympians had played me! And what in the world was I to do with them?

"I am surprised that Jupiter let you come," resumed I, going back to one of the office desks and leaning up against it, while I swept my visitors with a glance intended to be equally expressive of contempt and indignation. Gods as

they were, I was far too angry just now to be afraid of them. "He must have known very well that you couldn't get the money, and in that case he should have kept you up in the clouds. I don't think much of his 'decrees,' if this is the way they are executed. It's not my idea of divine behaviour, by any means."

"We humbugged the old Jew, you see," said Venus. "We were all so madly set upon the tour that we couldn't give it up, so we made him believe that the money was all right, and showed him our new clothes, and at last he said we might come away and be—something improper, you know."

"He's a green old buffer," observed Diana, "is the Jew."

"Yes," said Hercules, who spoke with a strong bucolic accent and a bluff indifference to grammar. If he had been English instead of Greek, he would most infallibly have dropped his *h*'s. "And then he up with his awful 'and, and raised his shaggy brows until his 'air stood on end, and then he decreed that the feet of the eight immortals should be planted upon the earth, and 'ere we are."

"He did not nod in confirmation, did he," I anxiously enquired, "when he had laid his hair down again?"

"No, sir," was the reply; "we particularly begged he wouldn't."

"I wish to goodness he had," said I, "and blown the whole lot of you into celestial atoms!"

"Except me," said Cupid; "you wouldn't like me to have been blown into atoms, I'm sure. Now, Praxy," continued the boy, jumping off the table and standing up in front of me, with his hands on my shoulders—"now, Praxy, you mustn't cut up rough and make yourself disagreeable. It isn't often we get the chance of a bit of fun, and we've got it now. You can give us a shake-down for the night easily enough, if you've a mind; and to-morrow we must have a talky-talky, and hit upon some dodge for raising the money. We'll pay you all right somehow or other, Praxy, don't you fear. So be a jolly brick, and say you'll help us. This place will do as well as any other——"

"If there's proper accommodation for the ladies, please," put in Diana.

"Ladies can get into the cupboard," said the boy. "Only we shall want another tin or two of biscuits, Praxy, because we're hungry. We've not had a mouthful to eat since we left our ethereal abode."

"Or drink either," observed Bacchus. "You'll send out for a few bottles of liquor, won't you, Praxy? Biscuits is dry eating."

"I could eat a slice of cold 'am," said Hercules, opening a mouth which might almost have stowed away the joint itself.

"And I could put away a cuttle-fish," said Neptune.

"And I could dispose of a *vol-au-vent,*" said Apollo, who delighted in French affectations, "or a red mullet *à la financière.*"

The whole thing was so comically absurd that I could not help laughing, and the laugh was fatal. Of course I had to give in and make the best of it; but as I never entertained any serious intention of turning my office floor into a sleeping-place for the gods, I proposed that we should adjourn forthwith to the hotel and secure such accommodation as might be available.

"You'll give me another ride, won't you, Praxy?" said Cupid, springing on my back as I stooped to lock the office door; "I'm tired, you know. It's a long journey by the limited express, for a boy like me."

I was fairly in for it now, so I thought I might as well resume my customary good nature, and let the little urchin have his way. He climbed up nimbly, therefore, from my back to my shoulders, and dangled his sturdy brown legs in front of me as coolly as if he had been my own pet nephew.

"Where have you left your luggage?" I enquired as we drew near to the inn door.

"Luggage?" repeated Hercules; "we ain't a-got none."

"No luggage?" exclaimed I, with horror.

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"Not a stitch, except the smocks we stand in," said Diana.

"Well," said I, "this beats everything I ever heard of! And how do you propose to travel without luggage! It isn't commonly respectable. I shall have to tell some frightful lies about it, in order to get you rooms even for one night at the hotel."

"Heavy packages on the way," said Mercury. "Not worth while to bring them with us just for a night or two."

"Strolling company *en route* for Athens," suggested Apollo, putting on a stage walk and making theatrical gestures with his hands. "Properties sent on to await arrival."

"Grand morning performance to-morrow afternoon at the Royal Parthenon The-ayter," added Hercules.

"By Jove!" said I to myself, "you two Olympian lunatics have given me an idea." And I began to think I saw my way.

The inn at the Piraeus is very small and homely, but as no big steamer had arrived within the last few hours, there happened to be room. I spent a disgraceful ten minutes in fabricating lies for the satisfaction of the landlord, who knew me well enough, of course, and was not likely to refuse any guests whom I brought to his doors. My chief difficulty was to explain the route by which the strangers had arrived, all arrivals at

such a seaport being well ascertained; but I made him believe at last that they had come in a small coasting boat from Corinth, and would meet their luggage at Athens in the morning. It will be understood that these historical events occurred before the opening of the Isthmus Railway.

Ten minutes later they were all busily engaged in consuming the best cold supper which the landlord could provide; and never in my life, except perhaps at the Zoo, did I see good solid food devoured so rapidly. When there was literally nothing left to eat, Bacchus proposed to order in a cask of wine and make a night of it; while Apollo shook back the long wavy hair which clustered upon his forehead, stood up with his elbow against the chimney-piece, and expressed his readiness to favour the company with a song. With the assistance of the landlord, however, whom I had meanwhile partly taken into my confidence, and who threatened to bundle his guests bodily neck and crop into the street if they did not go quietly off to bed that instant, I contrived to overrule these little convivial arrangements, and had the satisfaction of seeing my friends installed in their respective chambers, where the master of the house, at my particular request, locked them safely in. Having promised to look round early in the morning, I then went home to bed, and passed a considerable portion of an almost sleepless night in thinking out my plan.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEPTUNE LIES ATHWART-SHIPS.

BEFORE breakfast on the following day I telegraphed to London for a substitute, to be sent out immediately, as I was called away from the Piraeus on urgent private affairs. I then wrote an explanatory letter requesting three months' leave of absence, in order that I might put into execution a little project of my own, which scarcely fell within the line of business prescribed by my employers; promising, however, to place at their disposal half the profits of the undertaking, in case my scheme should prove successful. The people at the head office were under obligations to me for long service and exceptional devotion to their interests, and I felt certain that they would not refuse me.

Between seven and eight o'clock I strolled into the bureau of the hotel, paid all expenses incurred up to date by my celestial friends, roused the boy-god from his dreams of Psyche, and sent him down the passages to hammer at his companions' doors. This function he performed with such address that even Hercules

could not sleep through the thundering din; and in twenty minutes at the most the whole party had descended to the dining-hall, where they fortified themselves with rolls and coffee against the fatigues of the coming day.

"The Jew says you're a humbug, Praxy," said Cupid, piling a small pyramid of Hymettian honey on a plinth of butter, superimposed upon a cube of crummy bread.

"I am sorry for that," I replied; "I rather thought the old gentleman had a high opinion of me."

"So he had at first, but now he's found you out, you see. You swore you could cure his gout, and it's as bad as ever. And he has drunk a table-spoonful of that blessed powder in a cup of water seven times a day ever since Ganny brought up the bottles, and he can hardly stand."

"But it was the fluid magnesia that he was to take in table-spoons," said I, as soon as I could speak for laughing, "not the powder. If he's been going on like that every day for a week, I wonder that he is alive."

"He's got to live somehow, you know, because he is immortal. But he's having a precious rough time of it; and I wouldn't stay hanging about here too long, Praxy, if I were you. He might get wild, and finish you off with a thunder-bolt."

"That would be a pity," said I, "but it really is not my fault. I told him to take minute doses.

However, I'm going to Athens at nine o'clock by tramway, and I shan't be back for some little time, so it doesn't make much difference."

"And what are you going to do at Athens?" asked Mercury, looking round uneasily at his comrades. "Is it business of your own which takes you there?"

"I am going to arrange with the manager of the theatre for a grand exhibition of gods and goddesses, to be held every evening until further notice, and you are all going with me. You must get some clothes made up as nearly as possible like those you wear at Olympus; and the manager will have to write some short plays for you to act, or dialogues for you to recite; and we shall bring the house down. Apollo will sing and fiddle, and Hercules perform feats of strength, and Bacchus get roaring drunk, and Diana talk horsey, and Neptune swear like an old salt, and Mercury steal and play the clown. Venus will preside as Queen of Love and Beauty, and Cupid will enflame all hearts, and I shall do the showman and introduce you as you come upon the stage. There's no other possible way of raising money, that I can see; and when we've raised enough we'll be off on the personally conducted tour."

"I like the idea immensely," said Mercury; "but I'm hanged if I'll go to Athens."

"Nor I, nor I, nor I," said the whole lot of them in chorus.

"Oh ho!" said I, with a smile, looking curiously at their fine new clothes with pretended admiration. "That's it, is it?"

"Yes, that's it, Praxy," answered Cupid. "We won't any of us go, so there!"

"Well," said I, "I'm not sure that Athens would be a very good place, and I'm so perfectly certain of success that I don't mind risking an additional advance of money and going farther afield. So, if you prefer it, we'll go to Italy instead; only we must be off by this morning's steamer."

"Hurray!" cried Cupid; "that'll be rattling fun. I'm sure everybody agrees. You agree, don't you, Mummy?"

"What do you say, Diana?" asked Venus. "Shall we go?"

"I'm game, if you are," was the reply. "It's rather a bore being stared at by a lot of roughs, but I suppose it's the only way."

"The stage is quite a respectable profession, I assure you," said I. "Any amount of English ladies are on the boards."

"And what else are we to do?" asked Neptune. "We can't go back for the next three months, and we must get through the time somehow or other."

"Is it to be three months exactly?" I enquired.

"Thirteen weeks from yesterday," answered Bacchus. "On that Saturday evening we are all

to assemble by the shed where Ganymede caged his eagle, and as soon as it's dark enough Jupiter will give the word, and we shall be spirited up to heaven. Till then he doesn't intend to trouble his head about us; and as Mercury is off duty as a god, and Cupid hasn't brought his wings, we have no means of sending him a message."

"And suppose there's a moon?" observed I. "The nights are apt to be light about the end of May."

"But there won't be a moon," said Diana, "and this particular evening will be a dark one. I settled all that before I came away, while I was yet Queen of the Night."

"Then, ladies and gentlemen," said I, "since you are all resolved to try your fortunes with me, the sooner we get away the better. I must go to my rooms to pack up and make divers preparations for my journey, and I will meet you here at nine. The steamer sails for Brindisi at ten, and we shall have nice time to get on board. Some of you may perhaps like to take a short walk in the town, but there is very little to see."

"I think we had better stay indoors," said Mercury, looking round for an opinion.

"I think so too," said I, bestowing one.

"I don't know what you mean, I'm sure," said Mercury, beginning to be annoyed. "Is it far to the landing-place?"

"A few yards only," I replied, "and there is a charming saloon down below."

It fortunately happened that I had ready money enough in hand to pay all the fares to Brindisi; and, as I did my own private banking with the firm, I could draw at the office there for any amount I might require. I finished my packing, took leave of my landlady, looked in upon my clerks, who were on duty even on Sunday for an hour or so when a steamer ran, and at nine o'clock precisely joined my friends in the sitting-room at the hotel. They had employed their time in playing cards, and not one of them had shown his face or figure at the doorway. Cupid, rather to his disgust, was not allowed even to stand at the window and kill flies.

The police are a sleepy lot at Athens, and I got my gods and goddesses on board without let or hindrance. It was as great a relief to me as it could have been to themselves. A newsboy shoved off with us in the boat that took passengers on board, and I bought the *Athenian Gazette*. Under the heading of local news was a paragraph announcing the daring theft of eight suits of clothes, with underclothing from the largest warehouse at Athens, three days ago. Five of the suits were for men, two for women, and one was a set of knickerbocker flannels for a boy. A hatter on the same day had missed eight hats of various forms and sizes, corresponding with the

details given above; while a bootmaker made a similar complaint regarding eight pairs of shoes. As soon as we were fairly off, and the deities had judged it safe to venture on deck after their seclusion in the saloon, I passed the journal on to Mercury, and watched his expressive countenance as he read the paragraph in question. The expressive countenance turned decidedly pallid, and the expressive eyes looked up and met my own. The light-fingered god saw plainly that I knew all about it, and faintly returned my sympathetic smile.

"You won't say a word, Praxy, will you?" said he, crossing over and sitting beside me, while he laid his hand nervously upon my arm.

"My good fellow," said I, "it's nothing to me where you got your clothes, so long as they fit you; and I must say you have shown consummate taste in your choice of shapes and colours. But there must be no more of it, if you please. You can't fly off and make yourself invisible any longer, and there is probably no other country in the world where you would have got safely on board the steamer. Unless you wish to spend the best part of your tour in prison, refrain from the exercise of your divine but dangerous gift until you get back to heaven."

There were between twenty and thirty first-saloon passengers on board, many of whom were considerably impressed with the very remarkable

personal appearance of my friends. People thrown together in a steamer become frequently quite intimate enough to carry on the most animated conversations, without knowing, or even caring to know, each other's names; and it was not until we stood off Zante that anybody thought of enquiring who the mysterious strangers were.

"Of course your real name can't be Venus," said a gentlemanly-looking man of seven or eight and twenty, upon whom the wonderful beauty of the goddess had already begun to take effect.

"It is, I assure you," was the reply, "and I have no other."

"Not even a surname?"

"No, not even a surname, that I ever heard of. What's your own?"

"Alconbury—Lord Alconbury, if you like."

"Married?" asked Diana abruptly, at the top of her voice.

"No, worse luck; miserable old bachelor."

"Nice place in the country?"

"Fairly nice, for an impoverished English landlord. Acres are not worth what they used to be, you know."

"Good hunting anywhere near?"

"Four meets a week in the season; but I don't hunt myself—I can't ride."

"What a fib!" said Venus, laughing, as Diana tossed her head at him with contempt and walked away.

"One has to do it sometimes," pleaded Lord Alconbury, "in self-defence. How else was I to get rid of her? As a matter of fact, I never miss a run—that is, when I'm at home. I suppose, by way of keeping up the farce, that's Diana."

"That's Diana, and a particular friend of mine, so you must be civil to her. She's the only goddess down here except myself; all the rest are gods."

"But I do so wish you'd tell me the truth about yourself. You *must* have a surname."

"I haven't, really," answered Venus, in a tone of the most solemn truthfulness. "If you don't choose to believe me, I can't convince you."

"Of course I don't believe you," he rejoined; "you are playing with me. And if there's one thing I hate more than another, it is being treated like a child."

"Nobody would dream of treating you so, I'm sure; you are far too manly and clever. How do you come to talk Greek so perfectly?"

"I used to be at the Legation," explained Lord Alconbury. "I shouldn't speak it otherwise. It's a language which very few Englishmen take the trouble to learn. But your Greek is a deal more classical than mine, and I notice that you never use Turkish or Italian words. Of course you speak French as well?"

"Not a syllable," was the reply. "Greek is the only language I ever heard spoken in my life.

They talk no other in—that is, where I live, you know."

"In Olympus, I suppose you mean. Well, it really is too bad. I am beginning to be offended." So he took off his hat and walked away.

They would go on like this for hours, but he never got any further towards the solution of the mystery. All the ship could see that he was madly in love; and if she would only have given him a rational name to call her by, I verily believe he would have proposed before we reached Corfù.

"I can't make out your team," he observed on the second morning, strolling up to me. "The mischief is, they not only act the part quite faultlessly, but they look the character to perfection. If they merely stood in a row and posed, without uttering a syllable, any schoolboy could pick them out and say which was which. I never was so much bothered in my life. Now look here," he continued, drawing me into a quiet corner, "I don't intend to ask any question that a man ought not to ask, but I should feel deeply grateful to you if you would tell me frankly whether this Venus, as she calls herself, is the sort of woman whom a man like myself might ask to be his wife. It's a matter of more consequence to me than you may perhaps imagine."

"I wouldn't do it if I were you, my lord. I'd sooner go a thousand miles away, and forget that

I had ever seen her. I can't, and won't, say more than that, but that means as much as words can be made to mean."

"Thank you," said he, squeezing my hand; "you are a good, kind fellow." And as he turned his head to go down the ladder I saw that there were tears in his eyes.

As may readily be imagined, Cupid was an immense joke on board. The ladies went absolutely wild over the boy; and his ridiculous name, and persistent refusal to be called by any other, gave them an excuse for going any lengths they pleased in petting him. As Lord Alconbury had said, they looked their characters to perfection, and Cupid looked his best of all.

Until touching at the last Greek port the weather had been lovely, and the sea as smooth as the Danube at Passau; but towards the small hours of the morning, after putting off from Corfù, the wind got up suddenly, and we walked straight out into a nasty chopping sea. The steamer pitched abominably, and three-fourths of the passengers were laid low.

"Where's Father Neptune?" said the first officer to me when I went on deck about seven o'clock to get some coffee. "This is just the sort of weather for him. He ought to be alongside of the captain on the bridge, commanding the waves."

"So he ought," holloaed out the captain; "send down and fetch him. His beard will wag magnificently in this breeze."

I ran down the ladder, turned into the saloon, and drew the curtain of Neptune's "state-room," as the Americans euphoniously call a wretched den, some six feet by four, into which first-class passengers by sea are crowded. There were three berths in it — two, one above another, parallel with the bulkhead, and a single one opposite, placed at right angles. In the former lay Mercury and Apollo, sleeping soundly; in the latter sat up Neptune, whose attribute at present appeared to be, not a trident, but a round tin utensil with a short handle, and who looked the very image of a respectable old gentleman from the City, who has come abroad for the sake of his family, but has never been to sea before. Cupid and I had a cabin between us; while Hercules, who was two feet longer and eight inches broader than the roomiest berth in the ship, had appropriated two lengths of a cushioned sofa which surrounded the saloon, and made himself tolerably comfortable. As for Bacchus, it is my opinion that he never turned in at all. He had made friends with the steward, and passed a considerable portion of the night in consuming rum-and-water.

"Why, how's this, Neptune?" I enquired, with genuine astonishment. "You are the very last

man I should have expected to find in this melancholy plight. Lying athwart-ships, too! Surely you ought to know better than that. Enough to make anybody ill. You should have put one of the land-lubbers into that berth. Can I do anything for you?"

"No, thanks; I'm very bad. It's fifteen hundred years, you know, since I was at sea, and everything is so much changed. I don't like the steam, and the smells, and the thumping of the screw."

"Well, but you must rouse yourself, my good fellow, and make an effort to be jolly. What will everybody think of you? The captain wants you on the bridge; he has just sent me down to fetch you. I can't go and tell him you are sea-sick; he'll never believe me. Drink a brandy-and-soda, and come on deck like a man."

After a series of sad relapses I got my poor friend on deck, and gave him in charge to the first officer, who passed him on to the captain.

"So here you are at last, Neptune!" said the latter cheerily; "you're just the man I wanted. Come up on the bridge and help me to rule the waves. They're devilish disagreeable this morning. Every three minutes or so the bows are swept with spray, and if I hadn't got on a waterproof I should be drenched to the skin."

"Can't recollect just now the words I used to

calm the sea with," said Neptune feebly; "it's so very long ago. And I don't feel at home on board these blessed steamers; they bother me entirely."

"We've gone ahead of you, old man, haven't we? But you're not looking yourself this morning. Is anything the matter?"

"A little out of sorts, that's all. Some of the cook's Italian messes have disagreed with me. I think, captain, if you don't mind, I'll go down and fetch my pocket-handkerchief; I left it in the cabin."

"Pocket-handkerchief! What the devil does an ancient mariner like you want with a pocket-handkerchief? Besides, I could send a dozen fellows for it. What's your number?"

"I would rather go myself," said Neptune, clinging nervously to the rails as he descended; and when the captain beheld him, a few seconds later, leaning over the gunwale in dire distress, he had good cause to rejoice that he had not detained him longer.

Father Neptune certainly looked the character to perfection, but he can scarcely be said to have acted the part quite faultlessly. I entreated the captain and first officer to keep the secret of his disgrace, and I believe they did so; but the story was told by somebody, as such stories always are, and terrible was the chaff which the Controller

of the Waves endured. The winds will carry the tale of his humiliation to the clouds; and Olympus itself shall fall from its fleecy heights before the god has heard the last of his tin utensil, and his pocket-handkerchief, and the thumping of the screw.

CHAPTER IX.

A NAVAL ENGAGEMENT.

BEFORE reaching Brindisi I took an opportunity of explaining to my fellow-travellers the necessity of their adopting some rational names. These Olympian appellations were all very well as a joke, but would hardly pass muster in society. Besides, almost everywhere in Italy each one would be required to sign both his Christian and surname in the visitors' book at the hotel. For practical purposes, it made very little difference whether the names were Greek or English, as I intended in any case to pass them off as subjects of her Majesty. Thinking, therefore, to flatter their vanity, I gave them the choice of all the oldest family names in the British peerage, prefixing the prettiest Christian names which a lady novelist ever devised; but they obstinately refused to have anything to say to them. Venus would not be Gladys Hamilton; nor Diana, Beatrice Howard; nor Mercury, Archibald Fitz Bentinck; nor Bacchus, Montagu Pelham; nor Neptune, Augustus de Fleetwood; nor Apollo, Chichester Stanhope; nor Cupid, Willoughby

Tollemache; nor Hercules, Samson Hope-Greville. I don't know what more I could have done for them, but my offers were persistently declined. Venus declared that she would be Venus to the end of the chapter, and the rest followed suit with dogged determination.

"What do you call an old family?" asked Venus, with a curl of her lovely lip. "Why, the oldest peerage in England only dates from 1155, and I sprang out of the sea-foam four thousand years ago. As for Cupid, he was flitting about from heart to heart centuries before all the Howards and Fitz Bentincks were ever heard of. Willoughby Tollemache, indeed! I won't have my boy called by any such foolish name."

I saw that it was useless to press the point, and I pretended, therefore, to give in. But, of course, I was bound to be provided with a list of names for the satisfaction of the police; so I gave instructions to the head-waiter, immediately upon arrival, to bring the visitors' book to my own room, and entered them myself, ringing the changes on the nearest equivalents to Brown, Jones, and Robinson which the Greek language would supply.

Nobody stops at Brindisi, except to wait for a steamer; and for that very reason, as I was anxious to sever all connection with our fellow-passengers from Greece, I determined to remain at the *Indie Orientali* for at least a couple of

days. I could usefully employ my leisure in writing a few short plays and recitations for my celestial company—a literary effort of no very high order—which I might probably achieve as creditably as any manager of a theatre. It made very little difference what they said, as nobody would understand them; and the words would mainly serve as a cue to tone and gesture. But it would save time as well as money to have something ready for rehearsal; and, if money was to be made by the contemplated exhibition, there was no time to lose. As for the gods and goddesses, they must employ their leisure in watching the steamers from the quay.

The absurd rapidity with which Lord Alconbury had succumbed to the fascinations of my show figure opened my eyes to the literally appalling depths of the responsibility laid upon me. It was clear that no man of common flesh and blood would be able to withhold his admiration of her positively dazzling beauty; while the impetuous youth of moderately excitable disposition would fling himself recklessly at her feet before he had known her half a day. My position had become desperately awkward, and I wished with all my heart that the lovely goddess had stayed at home. Diana was safe enough—I should have little trouble with *her*—and Minerva would have been safer still; but this blessed Venus would be a source of perpetual anxiety, and might with

extreme probability get me into some serious row. The one consolation was, that she could neither speak nor understand a word of any language except her own. Ten chances to one she would never meet another man who could make love to her in Greek; and suitors of all other nations would be hopelessly deaf and dumb. If I could only keep Lord Alconbury away from her all might yet go well.

And this much was clear enough, that, whether things went well or ill, it was out of my power to mend them. The people had forced themselves upon me, and I must see them through their three months' tomfoolery as best I could. What else was it possible to do? If I gave them up to the police as vagrants from Mount Olympus, travelling at large without visible means of support, and told my story, who would believe me? I should be locked up as a lunatic, and somebody else would take round the show. There was no other conceivable means of providing money for their subsistence; and, now that I had undertaken the job, I must carry it through.

"I say, Praxy," said Cupid, bursting into my room soon after breakfast on the morning after our arrival, "we haven't got any money."

"No," I replied, "and I don't intend that you shall have any. You'll only be getting into mischief with it. What do you want money for?"

"I want to buy some sweets, and Mummy

wants a fan, and Apollo wants some *eau-de-Cologne,* and Neptune wants his hair cut."

"That's true enough, but he mustn't have it cut, all the same. Do you think I'm going to let my sea-god spoil his personal appearance and ruin the exhibition? I won't have his hair touched, or his beard either."

"That's all very fine, Praxy, but we can't go about the streets with empty pockets; and if you don't fork out, why, we shall just help ourselves."

"How do you mean, help yourselves?"

"You know very well what I mean. I mean, send Mercury round to the money-changers, or the bank, or the post-office, or the steam-ship agency, or any other place where there's a lot of loose coin lying about in the drawers. We intend to have it somehow."

"You precious little rascal!" said I, collaring the boy and boxing his ears. "And when you've got your money, how do you propose to spend it? You won't know what to ask for in the shops. Not one of you can talk Italian."

"We can point to the things we want, and hold up our fingers. Besides, there are ever so many shops where Greek is spoken. I've seen it written up outside."

"How much did they tell you to ask for?" I enquired at last, the conviction dawning upon me that I should have to give in. "I should think

half a franc would be enough for a little imp like you."

"Half a franc!" said Cupid, settling himself comfortably upon my knees. "Now, Praxy, don't you be mean. Five francs apiece is the very lowest figure we can accept, and that will only last till to-morrow morning. You must put us on an allowance, Praxy—five francs a day."

"I'll see you all at Jericho first," answered I. "But where have you left the others?"

"Down in the billiard-room, waiting till I bring the money. Mercury and Diana are playing Venus and Apollo for a franc a game, and they can't pay up till you produce the needful."

"Come along, then," said I; "we'll go down there together."

"Well, Praxy," said Diana, after a purely feminine stroke which had just missed ripping up the cloth, "and how much is it to be? You can't expect people in our rank of life to go about like paupers."

"I'll buy you anything you want," said I; "that is, anything in reason."

"But we'd sooner do our shopping for ourselves, you see; and we've a mind to go and do it now, straight away."

"If Mercury will take his solemn oath that he won't attempt to steal, and Neptune that he won't have his hair cut, and Bacchus that he won't get drunk, and all of you that you won't buy anything

dangerous or improper, I'll give you five francs each," said I, with an air of conscious liberality.

"It's not the sort of treatment I expected of you, *mon cher,*" drawled Apollo, languidly chalking his cue by way of apology for a miss, like many a more accomplished player. "The salt wind has made sad havoc with my complexion, and cosmetics are expensive. Five francs won't go very far."

"It's all you'll get," said I, laying the amount in paper notes upon the billiard-table. "So good-bye till luncheon-time, because I've got work to do; and mind there's no stealing."

The deities monopolised the billiard-room until twelve o'clock, by which time Mercury had appropriated twenty out of the five-and-thirty francs assigned to his companions—it need hardly be said by cheating. Their losses did not, however, appear to afflict them very deeply, since the money had only changed hands among themselves, and had not gone out of the family. The slippery god would have to stand treat in the afternoon to the full extent of each man's share, and the equilibrium would be adjusted.

We lunched soon after midday, the meal being chiefly remarkable, as all our meals were, for the voracious feeding of Hercules and the insatiable thirst of Bacchus. The god of the vintage found the light Italian wines so cooling after the stronger qualities of Olympus, that two quart bottles at

luncheon, and three at dinner, left him as sober as when he sat down to table. More than this I declined to give him; and, even so, he involved me in an extra charge of several francs a day. As for Hercules, his appetite was so indecent that no landlord at any hotel in which we stayed would consent to feed him, unless I paid for two dinners on his account instead of one.

I sat in my room scribbling plays and recitations until four o'clock, and enduring the untold agonies which any man must needs endure who attempts composition at a hotel in Italy. The whole population entered into a league to drive me out of my mind with excruciating noises. My room looked out into a "quiet" court, where a boots whistled the same four bars six hundred times, and a chambermaid sang lustily all the barrel-organ tunes she knew, and a carter cracked his whip for three-quarters of an hour, and a daughter of the house played five-finger exercises at an open window. A hundred yards distant was a church tower, where boys in the top story tinkled three broken bells every fifteen minutes with string and clapper. At the foot of the tower was a wine-shop where men played *morra,* shouting their monotonous units in discordant crash until I thought I must fling myself into the court below. In the adjacent barracks, once the convent of the church, soldiers were practising the bugle, a whole regiment playing all at once, and

I was reminded of Cerberus when he raised his three heads and howled. All these distracting dins, and many more, I had to bear with patience, seeing that there is no escape but death, and that no Italian is capable of understanding what you mean when you say that such things disturb you.

When the last straw had been laid upon the camel's back, and it was mercifully yet unbroken, I flung my pen upon the table and seized my hat and stick, and plunged down the staircase to the entrance-hall and doorway. I had been hard at work all day, and a run before dinner would revive me. The country around Brindisi is not inviting, and I instinctively turned my steps in the direction of the shore.

Having reached a spot several hundred yards beyond the mouth of the harbour, I observed two large sailing-boats about half a mile out to sea, the crews of which were not only shouting at each other with all their strength, but appeared to be actually engaged in naval warfare. Curiosity prompted me at once to take from my pocket a powerful opera-glass which I always carry, and by the aid of which I saw that my first impressions were not unfounded. In one of the boats stood four fishermen and a boy, who had furled their sails, and were defending themselves with raised oars against the onslaught of a hostile crew. In the stern of the other craft sat a rough-looking

old man with an enormous beard, who held the rudder, and appeared to be directing the attack. In the bows stood a boy in knickerbockers, peppering mercilessly with a catapult the four fishermen and their lad, who were evidently half blinded with the small shot, or whatever it was, which served him for ammunition. Next to him, with one foot on the gunwale, clearly watching his opportunity to spring into the enemy's boat, towered a gigantic figure, armed with a club of sufficient size and weight to brain any one of the fishermen at a blow. A slender youth wearing a wide-awake with the brim turned down over his neck and eyes, and a taller one with long flowing hair, were rowing in gondola fashion, their bodies bent forward towards the bows; while a stouter but still youthful figure lay down in the bottom of the boat, to all appearance asleep or tipsy. Two ladies sat on cushioned seats near the stern, one of whom tossed water into the enemy's boat out of a large flat shell, while the other blew at intervals loud blasts upon a species of huntsman's horn, by way of cheering the combatants to victory.

"Well," said I to myself, "this is a pretty state of things! If Hercules once gets into that boat, not one of those wretched fishermen will ever sail back into the harbour. What an idiot I was to let them have any money! Catch me ever trusting them out of my sight again!"

Meanwhile there was mischief going on, and I was powerless to prevent it. They would scarcely have heard my shouts, and there was no boat within range of calling. What upon earth should a poor personal conductor do?

At this moment, by a marvellous stroke of luck, the steam-launch of the *Crocodile* came suddenly in sight from behind a low, projecting piece of coast-line just outside the harbour. I knew the captain and several officers of all the troop-ships, and I felt certain that any one of them would take me out to the scene of the scrimmage, if I could only get on board. There was water enough to bring the launch right alongside the flat rock on which I stood, and her nose was pointing towards me. After a few minutes' steaming she changed her course and put out to sea; but I threw up my hands and yelled, and made such touching signals of shipwrecked mariner's distress that she appeared to think better of it, and held on as before. At the distance of about a hundred yards she slackened speed and went astern, and finally pulled up within a yard of the spot where I was standing.

"May I come on board?" said I, recognising, to my great joy, an officer whom I knew perhaps best of all.

"In with you!" cried he; and in two minutes I had told my story. "Who are they?" enquired

the officer, who promised at once to help me to the utmost of his power.

"A party of Greeks whom I brought from Athens yesterday; but they're thundering fools, and I fear I shall have some trouble with them. If I can only give them a jolly good frightening about this foolish business at the start, I may probably get them well under control, and they won't dare to play such tricks again. So I shall tell them that you are armed with authority to lock them up, and I hope you will support me in anything that I say."

"All right!" said he. "We'll make them hand up their oars, and tow them back to the harbour. It's all the same to me where I go. We only came out on a sort of trial trip, because the launch has had some tinkering done to her engine."

We dashed in between the combatants, not a second too soon. Hercules had just stepped into the trawler, and was raising his club with the evident intention of finishing off his enemies one by one. Recognising my voice, however, as I shouted out his name, he dropped the weapon into the boat, and contented himself with the comparatively harmless freak of hurling the biggest fisherman headlong into the sea.

"If you touch another of those men," cried I, "you shall go to prison. Strong as you are, you can't overpower half a dozen armed police officers;

and, unless you go back into your own boat directly, I'll have you locked up in less than an hour."

"They've been a-chaffin' of us," said the giant, mopping his cheeks and forehead with his shirt-sleeves. "They 'ad the cheek to call me Lungo, and they was uncivil to the ladies."

"I don't care what they did; you go back this instant. I'm ashamed of you, Neptune—encouraging these fools in such a piece of imbecility. At your age, too. What have you got in your hand, Cupid?"

"A catapult, Praxy. I tried to get a bow and arrows, but I couldn't."

"Give it me directly. And what have you been firing—pebbles?"

"No—small shot, Praxy; but they're all gone, upon my honour," added the boy, turning out the lining of his pockets. "I just planted the last of them on the bridge of the young un's nose, and didn't he holloa!"

"And where's Bacchus?—oh, drunk, of course. Get up, you good-for-nothing rascal, and hand over that flask of wine."

"But it's more than half full, Praxy. Not one of them has had a drop except me, and they're all thirsty."

"Hand it over instantly. If you don't know how to behave like men, you must be treated like children. Diana, I'll trouble you for that

bugle; and Venus, just be so good as to pass me down your shell. Has any other god or goddess got any attributes to surrender? Toss me that club out of your boat," I cried out in Italian to the soused fisherman, who had climbed over the gunwale of the trawler, and stood dripping in the bows. "And if you'll come to the hotel this evening between eight and nine, I'll take care that you are fully compensated for any damage they may have done you. But you had better not make any complaint to the people at the port. You'll get nothing by it, and I shall make it worth your while to hold your tongues. I'm extremely sorry if anybody's hurt, but these Greeks are all as mad as hatters, so you mustn't mind."

"That young devil has riddled us finely with his cursed catapult," said one of the men. "We all had to fight blindfold, for fear of losing an eye. My face is like a target at the rifle-butts, and the old woman will think I've got the measles. I'm blessed if he ever once missed his aim."

"He never misses, worse luck!" said I, laughing; "that's his trade. However, I'll whip him soundly for it when we get home."

"And I'll break his curly head for it," said the drenched fisherman; "and I'll be even yet with that great hulking Lungo."

"No, no!" said I; "you must drink a bottle

of wine together this evening, and shake hands all round and make friends. And now you shall see how I am going to avenge your injuries and make the Greeks look small."

During this brief digression the celestial crew had somewhat recovered from the alarm which my energetic proceedings had at first inspired, and were conversing together in clearly mutinous language. The moment I had finished talking to the fishermen, Mercury stood up to discharge his ancient office as spokesman of the divinities.

"This sort of thing won't do, Praxy," said the god of eloquence, coming straight to the point with praiseworthy contempt for prologue. "You appear to have forgotten who we are. The dwellers on Mount Olympus cannot submit to be treated as you are treating us to-day. We demand an apology upon your knees, and the restitution of our attributes——"

"I wants my club," said Hercules, rather spoiling the effect of Mercury's dignified address and polished manner.

"And I want my flask of wine," said Bacchus.

"And I want my horn," said Diana.

"And I want my pretty shell," said Venus—"a trophy from my native sea."

"And I want my catty," said Cupid; "and Praxy must stand a pound of shot for taking it away from me."

"I don't care who you are," said I, "or where

you dwell. You're among the mortals now, and you must observe the laws of the country. If you don't, the mortals will lock you up in prison, and you may get out as best you can. As for going down on my knees, I'll see you all shod like asses first. As for the attributes, they're confiscated. And as for the flask of wine, the gentlemen on board the launch will do you the honour to drink your health with it, as soon as they have towed you back to Brindisi. Your only chance of escaping prison, when you get there, is to sit quietly in your boat and do as I tell you; so just hand up your oars."

The officer in command of the launch did not understand a word I said, and as everything depended upon promptitude of action, there was no time to explain. But I repeated the last four words in English, and he backed me up immediately, sending his small crew forward to enforce the order, with their drawn dirks in their hands. The deities gave in at once; the oars were handed up into the launch, the boat made fast to the stern, and in two minutes we were steaming in the direction of the port and waving our hats to the fishermen.

"It is not every day," said I to myself, as I watched the boat dancing in the wash of the steam-launch, while Father Neptune drummed his fingers upon the useless tiller and Cupid dangled his brown legs over the bows—"it is

not every day that one enjoys the distinction of towing eight gods and goddesses ignominiously into port, in a boat without sails or oars. I wonder whether anybody will believe my story when I tell it to the world!"

CHAPTER X.

BACCHUS AND THE FAUN.

As I expected, I had scarcely dismissed the Olympians to their respective rooms, which I did with a frown of disapproval and an imperious wave of the hand, such as Jupiter himself could not have surpassed for dignity, when Cupid was despatched to coax me into a good humour and make me promise to beg them off from being sent to prison.

"You have all been behaving very badly," said I, "and I am not at all sure that I shall forgive you. What do you mean, you wretched boy, by peppering a lot of seafaring Italians in the face with a catapult at five yards' distance? I wonder you didn't put their eyes out."

"I *must* shoot *something,* Praxy," said the little rogue; "but if you'll let me have the catty back again, I swear most solemnly never to take a pot-shot at *you.*"

"You'd better not," said I, pulling his ears. "And now run off and tell them they shan't go to prison this time. But if ever they break loose again, I'll publish a decree, and nod my head,

and have done with them. *I'm* Jupiter now, you know."

From that moment my authority was established, and as we assembled in the reading-room on our way to dinner, each god and goddess came up to me very prettily in turn and begged my pardon. The fishermen and their boy put in an appearance later on, their battered faces bearing painful testimony to Cupid's unerring aim; but they forgot their scars over a flask of good Apulian wine, which I caused the rival crews to discuss round a table in the smoking-room, Bacchus in the chair. When Cupid and the fisher-boy had smashed a tumbler apiece over the genial ceremony of clinking glasses, they adjourned by preference to the quay in front of the hotel, where they amused themselves after their own fashion for an hour or so, conversing by means of signs, and returned with their arms entwined around each other's necks, the best of friends. As for their elders, they parted soon after ten o'clock on excellent terms; a fifty-franc note which I bestowed upon the aggrieved Italians tending no doubt to make reconciliation easier. These personally conducted deities were becoming expensive, but I entertained a daily increasing confidence that I should see my money back again.

After the episode of the naval engagement, I thought it prudent to reconsider my intention of

remaining a second day at so dull a place as Brindisi, where Satan would have it all his own way with the idle hands, and to go off at once to Naples. On arrival I sent for tailors and dressmakers, who should manufacture Olympian costumes for my team; and in three days, under the clever supervision of Venus and Apollo, the garments were satisfactorily supplied. There was but little workmanship or nicety of fit involved in their manipulation, the chief points being the effective blending of colours and the gracefulness of the folds.

Meanwhile I had engaged a small theatre in the lower and more densely populated part of the town, and had advertised performances for three successive nights, to commence as soon as the properties were ready. Each night the theatre was crammed to overflowing, and the exhibition in itself a complete success; but the limited accommodation of the building, and the necessity of fixing a low price for admission in so poor a neighbourhood, prevented my realising any approach to a remunerative sum. Deducting all expenses, my nett returns for three nights amounted only to £100. I needed to make as much as this every evening in order to defray the cost of the three months' tour and leave myself a fair profit in hand.

On the third night the manager of the largest theatre in Naples, whose house was to be opened

for the season in about a week, came behind the scenes and introduced himself, offering his most effusive congratulations. He had never seen anything of the kind so perfectly irresistible, and he was prepared to make liberal arrangements for the few nights at his disposal if I would shift my company to his theatre, and advertise a series of performances, commencing on the morrow. I asked 2500 francs a night, and he accepted my terms immediately.

I am a very bad showman, and I have no intention whatever of describing the exhibition in detail. The whole thing was eminently distasteful to me, and I never should have embarked in it but for the necessity of making money. The "walk up, ladies and gentlemen" style of business is not in my line at all, and even the few words of formal introduction in which I was forced every evening to present my deities to the spectators were spoken against the grain. But in point of fact they needed no introduction whatever. Venus could have been no one else except Venus, and every urchin knew her at a glance. Even in her European attire she looked the character; how much more when clad in the ethereal raiment of her own Olympus! She sat and stood and moved just as I had seen her in the banquet-hall of the gods, and the radiance of her beauty was unspeakable. Had there been no other attraction in the programme, the Neapo-

litans would have paid their money willingly night after night for the privilege of beholding Venus alone.

But there were so many other attractions in the programme. Cupid enjoyed even greater popularity than his "Mummy," because, in addition to his marvellous beauty and the inimitable performance of his part, he was always "such splendid fun." We could not make him fly, but he darted about at his mother's bidding from gallery to gallery, and from box to box, pretending to wound the ladies' hearts, and displaying the most wickedly precocious judgment in the selection of his victims. Sometimes the little imp would get up a "case" between some elderly gentleman and a virgin well advanced in years, to the infinite amusement of the gaping audience in the pit; and yet all his chaff and impudence were conducted in good taste, and he never took liberties or gave offence to the most touchy among the spectators. It almost seemed as if a breath of the divine inspiration had come back to him at the fingering of his bow and arrows, or at the spreading of his mimic wings.

Then there was Apollo, who sang Greek songs, accompanying himself upon the guitar—and sang them in a voice so strange and god-like, and yet so full of human passion and sympathy, that the entire audience was rapt in wonder, and tears stood in rough men's eyes. His beauty, also, like that of Venus, would have sufficed to

fill the house with admirers, even if he had stood alone upon the stage. Never was there seen in one face and figure such a union of tenderness and majesty, of brightness and languor, of vigorous action and sublime repose.

Then there was Mercury, who stole purses from respectable citizens' pockets and bracelets from ladies' wrists with admirable dexterity and cunning. And Hercules, to whom twelve labours had been assigned, in the course of which he performed such incredible feats of strength that nobody would believe he was a man. Neptune sat enthroned on a sea-girt rock, planting his trident in the shallow wave and detaching long ribbons of sea-weed from his untidy beard. To the intense delight of the juveniles, whose eyes were fixed upon this appendage from the beginning of the performance until the end, the god would produce at intervals from its shaggy depths an inexhaustible supply of weed; each extraction, as he held up the fragment with an expression of reproach and dropped it in the water, eliciting a fresh burst of ringing laughter from the boys and girls. Diana made less impression than her comrades, as there was nothing for her to hunt, and her beauty was of a cold, unattractive order. But Bacchus received always a hearty round of applause, as he reeled with uncertain step upon the stage, crowned with ivy, or sang merrily some Anacreonic ode in praise of wine.

While at Naples I made arrangements for a week's exhibition in Rome, another in Florence, and a third at Milan. At each place I received £100 a night, and by the end of the first week in April I had cleared £3000. I did not let my deities know how much I was making, or they would have struck work long ago; but it was well understood between us that after a week at Milan they were to be free. Plays and recitations would give way to six weeks of pure amusement; and then there must be a hurried journey back to the Piraeus, to keep the appointment at Ganymede's shed on the last Saturday in May.

Our performances commenced at eight, and so very little was necessary by way of rehearsal or preparation that the entire day was practically at our own disposal. While at Naples we paid three long visits to the Museum, where the gods were frequently amused and sometimes disgusted, but seldom flattered, at the contemplation of their effigies in bronze or marble.

"My body bain't in lumps like that," said Hercules, when I showed him his celebrated Farnese statue. "The fellow that put them limbs together never seed me in the flesh, I'll take my oath on. The only part of me that's the least bit like is that 'ere club."

"Ah, Bacchus and the Faun!" said the merry god, looking up at the famous group in the Hall of Masterpieces. "Well, I was such a very

diminutive infant at the time that I can't say positively what I did, but it strikes me as probable that, if a faun ever had the impudence to put me on his shoulders and carry me along like that, I scratched and kicked and howled until he put me down again. I certainly don't remember smiling at the beggar; but of course it's a very long time ago."

"Why do they always make me look as if I'd just walked out of a bathing-machine, and wished I'd stopped inside?" asked Venus, after inspecting a room full of statues in her honour.

"That's not such a bad likeness of Ganny," observed Cupid, looking critically at his playfellow. "But I never got tied in a knot with a dolphin when I was small—now, did I, Mummy? I'm sure you wouldn't have let me."

"Oh, that's Mercury in repose, is it?" said the messenger of the gods. "Well, it's not my idea of a very comfortable attitude. I like something to lean my back against. And I should have said the gentleman in bronze was catching flies."

"The modellings of my face and figure in these *salons* are quite too distinctly inferior," drawled Apollo, running his fingers through his hair and surveying himself complacently from his gaiters to his necktie. "I vote we take a *promenade en voiture* in the Via Nazionale, and hear the band play."

Of course we spent a Sunday at Pompeii, and made the indispensable trip by steamer to Capri and the Blue Grotto, and went up Vesuvius, where Venus shed crocodile tears at the thought of her absent Vulcan, whose memory came suddenly back to her, for the first time since she left Olympus, while gazing into the subterranean fires.

"Poor fellow!" said Venus, sighing like the furnace itself; "I trust, for my sake, that he is not labouring above his strength. His works are on so large a scale, and his orders so numerous, that he may even now be plying the bellows that fan these very flames. I wonder whether he is thinking of me."

"You bet he isn't," said Cupid. "He's whistling the 'Harmonious Blacksmith,' considerably out of tune, and thinking whether there'll be sprats for dinner."

"Could I believe it," rejoined the goddess, "I were almost happy. But no!" she added, sobbing afresh, "it may not be. His thoughts have wandered far away from his menial workshop to his personally conducted bride."

"Look here, Mummy," said Cupid, "if you cry like that you'll put the fire clean out, and the bellows will stop blowing. He's very well contented where he is, Mummy, and so are you." It is thus that small boys presume to chaff their mothers in these disrespectful days.

"Might I suggest, madam, that you should wash down your grief with a glass of white Vesuvian wine?" asked Bacchus, handing a tumbler to the goddess, who emptied it at a draught, and smiled through her happy tears.

"Boo, woo!" said Cupid, flinging his face upon his mother's lap and beginning to bellow like an infant bull.

"What's the matter now?" asked Venus, raising the urchin in her arms. "Did the naughty sulphur get into its pretty eyes?"

"Boo, woo! nobody asks me to wash down *my* grief. And to think of my beloved Psyche, two thousand miles away!"

"Get up, you little brat!" cried Venus, pushing the boy towards Bacchus, who filled him a tumbler of the golden liquid to mingle with his tears.

CHAPTER XI.

DIANA RECEIVES AN OFFER.

Of all the excursions from Naples which can be made in the course of an easy day, that to the Blue Grotto and Capri is the most popular; and our intention to take the nine o'clock steamer for the island was barely announced at dinner-time on the previous day, when half the hotel begged permission to join the party.

"The more the merrier," said I, "so long as we don't sink the ship; and perhaps we may have the luck to crowd out those ghastly musicians. It would indeed be a matter of thanksgiving to get across the bay for once without being worried with a lot of barrel-organ tunes, and deafened with the vulgar yellings of some Neapolitan street-singer."

"Oh fie, Mr. Tomkins!" exclaimed Miss Gushington. "I love to hear the child of the sunny South warbling his melodious notes to the blue Italian sky."

"That's more than I do, madam. I think he's an intolerable nuisance. How English travellers with taste and culture can listen to such stuff

beats my comprehension. If the same species of ruffian were to tweak and bellow under your drawing-room windows in London, you would send for the policeman; but because he's a child of the sunny South, and yells under an Italian sky, you elevate your hands and eyes in ecstatic rapture. These Neapolitans must think us a precious parcel of fools, to be gammoned into the delusion that such a miserable effect of screeching and scraping is music."

"Ah, Mr. Tomkins," simpered the old-young lady, rising from the table, "you are a *practical* man, you see, and I don't like practical men; I like poetry. I shall go and discourse with Apollo about the Muses."

"The loss is mine, madam," I replied, laying my hand upon my false heart and thanking Heaven for yet another mercy. Apollo meanwhile had caught the sound of his own name, and, guessing rightly at the nature of the fair spinster's affectionate designs, had bolted into the billiard-room.

Among the passengers in the steamer was the Rev. Elijah Crump, a Baptist minister with a large flat face, supported upon an enormous substructure of white cravat and collar. He had travelled much in Palestine, and was the author of a popular treatise upon the "Handmaidens of the Bible;" but he had not yet succeeded in obtaining a partner of his own domestic joys and

sorrows. In obedience to one of those unaccountable freaks of fancy which impel the most unlikely men in the most unlikely direction possible, the reverend gentleman had within the last few days discovered the handmaiden of his fond desires among my personally conducted deities at the hotel; and during our voyage from Naples to Sorrento he informed me of his intention to offer himself, with all his sanctity and all his Biblical research, at the shrine of the great goddess Diana.

"I am well aware," said the worthy minister, with an apologetic wave of the hand, "that she is at present an actress; but of course, when she becomes Mrs. Crump, she will move in a totally different sphere."

"It is not so easy to say with any precision," I rejoined, "in what sphere the young lady may be moving some few months hence; but I should keep well on the other side of the table, if I were you, while making any such proposal."

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Tomkins. Do you seriously wish me to believe that a young person in her class of life could feel otherwise than flattered by an offer of marriage from a gentleman of sufficient private means, and a—in fact a minister?"

"I mean in all sober earnest that the particular young person in question will not feel flattered at all, Mr. Crump, and I can only repeat my advice

that you should not venture too near her. She is capable of hitting hard."

"I never was struck by a lady yet," observed the excellent man, complacently feeling the edge of his capacious collar. "What's the Greek for *I love you,* Mr. Tomkins?"

"Surely you know as much as that?" I replied. "Maid of Athens—don't you remember?"

"Oh, of course! It is such a very long while since I read anything of Byron's. Well—if I repeat the last line of the verse to her, I suppose that will be sufficient?"

"More than sufficient, a good deal, I should say." The fool was clearly bent upon his folly, and it was useless to warn him any further. Such warnings are seldom taken in good part, and I could see that the minister was already half offended.

"What are those little red volumes which the English are always reading out loud to one another?" asked Apollo.

"German guide-books," I replied. "Every British tourist carries one in his pocket wherever he goes."

"But why German?" rejoined the god. "I thought the English were such a patriotic and loyal race. Have they no Hand-book of their own?"

"To be sure they have, and a very excellent one too, well known to every intelligent traveller.

But it costs about a shilling more, and some people will do a good deal to save a shilling."

"What, throw over their own countrymen, and play into the hands of a foreigner? Why, it's as bad as flying the enemy's flag!"

"Every bit," I assented, "though I don't suppose it ever occurred to an Englishman to look at the matter in any such light. Other nations, however, are less obtuse. You don't catch a German or a Frenchman using an English hand-book. He'd see us all at Jericho first. And if he did use it, he would prove, at any rate, his proficiency in our language. Whereas the British tourist, with his German guide-book, not only betrays his disloyalty by preferring a foreign author to a countryman of his own, but publishes his ignorance by taking refuge in a translation. He couldn't read a line of it, to save his life, in the original tongue."

As we shoved off for the Blue Grotto, Miss Gushington successfully manœuvred to secure a place in Apollo's boat, while Miss Tailormade conferred a like honour upon Mercury. The latter nymph, of nine-and-twenty, thought she looked bewitching in a tight blue pilot jacket with sporting pockets and flat brass buttons, a starched open shirt-front with three horsey studs, an upright dog's-eared collar, her brother's boating ribbon for a necktie, and a boy's straw hat, attached by a silver-plated knitting-needle to one of the upper-

most tufts of her wiry hair. If she could only have seen herself as others saw her, she would have stayed all day in bed rather than make herself such a guy.

There was the usual amount of innocent nonsense at the entrance arch—the ladies declaring that they would never have the courage to go in, and pretending to be afraid that they should never get out again. Then, of course, everybody had to duck his head, and you can't duck your head in a small crowded boat without putting it in somebody else's lap; and so Miss Gushington breathed a hysterical sigh into Apollo's watch-pocket, while Miss Tailormade committed the wealth of her fluffy hair to the apothecary, ploughboy, and thief of Mercury's waistcoat buttons. Then there was the inevitable diver, from whose coppery skin "the elfish light fell off in hoary flakes"; and the no less inevitable panic when a small American boy holloaed out to his sister, "O Hilda! here's a jolly lark! The sea has got up like mad while we've been fooling around in here, and the mouth of the cave is blocked up with great big rolling waves!"

"Pick me out a nice fat donkey, Mr. Crump," said Diana in elementary French to her admirer, as he assisted her out of the boat at the landing-place. "I'm sure you must be a good judge of one."

The minister vindicated her good opinion by

selecting a huge drab quadruped, almost as big as a bullock, upon which, with the valuable assistance of the bare-legged boy in charge, he succeeded at last in hoisting the goddess of the chase. As a reward for this service he was permitted to walk alongside up the hill, with his hand affectionately reposing upon the donkey's bristly mane. But the creature must have sagaciously divined that the caress was intended for its fair rider; and being ticklish about the neck, it resented the familiarity by a shudder which upset the reverend gentleman into an adjacent ditch, and kept him at arm's length for the future.

Day visitors to Capri spend a full hour of the short time at their disposal in lunching at the excellent hotel; and the appetite of several of our party was so insatiable that I had some little difficulty in persuading them to leave the table. Hercules indeed, having failed to obtain satisfaction out of the somewhat scrappy dishes handed round to him, flatly refused to stir until he had been supplied with a supplementary beef-steak and a solid pound of cheese. Bacchus was only too glad to keep him company while finishing his second bottle of wine; and Diana, who played a very nimble knife and fork at most of our collations, was easily persuaded to sit and look on while the gentlemen enjoyed themselves. Foreseeing in these convivial arrangements a chance of making known to the fair huntress the brilliant prospects

which lay before her, the Rev. Mr. Crump also lingered in the dining-hall, while the rest of us went our way. Only two hours remained for the exploration of the Natural Arch and the ruined Villa of Tiberius, and we had no time to lose.

Half-an-hour later Hercules had devoured his steak, and was encouraging the process of digestion by a lounge upon the sofa of the saloon which opened out of the dining-room. Bacchus had drunk the last of his wine, and had gone out, at Diana's request, to see whether the donkeys were in readiness at the door-step; while the chaste goddess herself sat nibbling the last survivor of a plateful of biscuits which she and the Baptist minister had consumed between them. Whether by accident, or in deference to my homely caution, the rev. gentleman had seated himself immediately opposite the lady of his choice, and was now engaged in printing some large letters, with the aid of a BB pencil, upon the back of a *menu*. The printing appeared to be a work of time, and Diana had more than once asked him what he was doing; but he invariably put her off with a wave of his left hand, and the reply, "Attendez, mademoiselle, vous verrez."

At last the elaborate exercise was completed, and after holding it up to the light to make sure that it contained no mistakes, and adding a few more touches to intensify the blackness of the

down-strokes, the bold lover laid his hand upon his heart, bowed adoringly across the table, and handed the inscription to Diana.

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed the goddess, pushing back her chair and flashing divine wrath from her lustrous eyes. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know of course, miss," replied the minister, "that at present you are only an actress; but I trust you will soon abandon that somewhat godless profession, and become the pious and helpful wife of one who will consecrate the best of his energies to the interesting work of your conversion."

"Hercules!" shouted the offended deity into the adjacent drawing-room, where a sound as of distant thunder rumbling on the mountain-tops behind Sorrento proclaimed that the demi-god was refreshing himself with forty winks after his meal —"Hercules, come here! This man," she continued, as the huge form of the giant appeared in view—"this man has dared to tell me in bad Greek that he loves me, and to propose in worse French that I should become his pious wife. Just strap his ugly hands behind his back, and set him upon some donkey that will kick, with his head towards the animal's tail."

So promptly were these commands executed that in less than five minutes the Rev. Mr. Crump found himself ignobly perched upon a restless-

looking beast who winked his appreciation of the joke by sticking his long ears perpetually awry; while Bacchus assisted in fastening the rider's legs securely to the stirrup leathers; a small boy stationed himself behind the group, armed with a bludgeon of sufficient thickness to make the donkey "go"; and Hercules placed himself at the head of the procession, by way of proclaiming to the natives of Capri what manner of reward was wont to be meted out to the man whom the Queen of the Night delighted not to honour. In this hapless condition I met my enamoured friend as I descended with the rest of the party from the ruins on the hill, where I had just finished a lucid explanation of various dilapidated walls and arches, borrowed from the voluminous writings of the learned Professor X., who knows just as much about them as I do.

"Oh my, Hilda!" yelled the American boy to his sister, "here's an old chap riding like the clown at a circus, with his head the wrong way! And see, if he hasn't got a great white label pasted on his back—*Ζωή μου, σᾶς ἀγαπῶ*—what does that mean, anyway?" continued the lad, who was sufficiently familiar with the Greek character, but not very far advanced in the language.

"Mr. Tomkins," exclaimed the Rev. Elijah, "I appeal to you for protection. This ruffian here has assaulted me—assaulted me violently, brutally, with no regard either for my social position or my

sacred calling; and as he is one of your gang, I hold you responsible for the outrage."

"I don't know what you mean by 'gang,' Mr. Crump," I replied, drawing myself up with such dignity as became a personal conductor of gods and goddesses; "and I simply decline all responsibility in the matter. If, however, you will have the goodness to tell me precisely what has occurred, I will do my best at any rate to get your arms and legs untied, and to reverse your position on the donkey."

"I'll tell you what has occurred, sir!" said the Rev. Elijah, who could scarcely articulate his words for rage and excitement. "I did but announce my desire to raise this young person who calls herself Diana, from the godless condition of a strolling player to the dignity of a minister's wife, when she drew herself up like an offended duchess, and said something in heathen Greek to this great hulking bully, who thereupon seized me as if I had been a runaway slave, carried me out of the dining-hall just as a porter carries a trunk, and strapped me on to this animal in the position in which you find me."

"Why didn't you appeal to the landlord, Mr. Crump?"

"I did appeal, but neither he nor his crowd of under-strappers dared to interfere; and just at the last moment, as we were starting off, up came Miss Diana, with a wet paint-brush in one hand,

and the luncheon *menu* in the other, and pasted the card upon my back. I'll have satisfaction for all these insults, sir, when we get home to Naples; and I call upon you now, as leader of the party, to remove the objectionable label and set me free."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Crump, that any slight should have been offered to a gentleman of your worth and respectability; but if you really wrote that nonsense on the card, and showed it to Diana, I can only feel surprised at your getting off so easily. I warned you, if you remember, that the young lady was not likely to be flattered by your well-meant proposal; and I can assure you, from what I know of the manner in which she has treated lovers as ardent, if not as pious, as yourself, that you have every reason to congratulate yourself upon faring no worse."

"She shall smart for it, the brazen-faced vixen!" cried the minister, whose love appeared to be changed into hate. "And so shall this unregenerate monster, who presumed to tie my legs and arms."

"We must manage to get them untied somehow or other, Mr. Crump," said I consolingly; though I saw, from the angry fire which still shone in Diana's eyes, that it would take all my power of persuasion to pacify her. However, I succeeded at last in prevailing upon her to con-

sent to the reversal of the Rev. Elijah's uncomfortable position, and to the enfranchisement of his irreproachable legs; but neither threats of consular interference nor dark hints of probable proceedings in the Neapolitan police-court could induce the virgin goddess to relax her chastisement of the minister's audacity any further.

"If he had done it three months ago, Praxy," said the insulted queen, "I'd have changed him into the longest-eared ass in all Italy, and his next offer of marriage should have been a sonorous bray. Lucky for him that he has only been made to bestraddle the beast, and look like a fool. You may turn his back to the donkey's tail, if it suits him best to ride that way; but I won't have his hands untied, or the label taken off his back, till he gets on board the steamer."

Not feeling particularly interested either in the reassertion of the rev. gentleman's dignity or the restitution of his comfort, and being forced to acknowledge that he had brought his trouble very much upon himself, I pressed the point no further. Bacchus untied his legs, the American boy cried, "Right about face," and Hercules shifted the unhappy minister into position as if he had been a sack full of autumn leaves. The whole party then proceeded down the hill; but it was not until we had taken our places in the small boat on our way to the steamer that the demi-god received orders to free his prisoner's hands, and tear off

from the beplastered back of his clerical coat his ill-fated declaration of love.

Mr. Crump thought better of his determination to prosecute the deities for assault. Upon calm reflection, he perceived that nothing but ridicule was to be gained by publishing the story of his humiliation to all the world. He left our hotel early on the following day, and retired to a quiet *pension* frequented by maiden ladies of unlimited respectability though limited means, where the charms of no pagan actresses would seduce his well-regulated mind, and the rude hands of no demi-god do violence to his sacred person. But he will not soon forget the presumptuous moment in which he raised his eyes with matrimonial intention to the great goddess Diana. Even in the humblest *pension* some unpretending slip of paper is passed from hand to hand along the dining-table by way of apology for a *menu;* and no bill of fare will ever again meet the Rev. Elijah's expectant and hungry gaze, but as he scans its list of dainties he will mechanically turn the document face downwards, even as he himself was turned face backwards on the saddle of the ass, and he will translate to himself, in language more vigorous than classical, the too expressive words, *Ζωή μου, σᾶς ἀγαπῶ.*

CHAPTER XII.

BACCHUS DRINKS VIN ORDINAIRE.

We passed a very pleasant week in Rome, making the most of the short time at our command, and visiting chiefly the various galleries of sculpture, through which the deities loved best to ramble. At Florence, Venus saw and criticised her famous recumbent figure by Titian, and expressed so strong a desire to compare it with Giorgione's version of the same interesting subject that I felt bound to include Dresden in our tour. From Milan we ran across to Venice, where the romantic indolence of the gondola life so charmed Apollo that I had much ado to get him any farther. Thence over the Brenner to Munich, and through Dresden to Paris, our intention being to spend a clear three weeks in London before returning eastward.

Ever since our arrival at Naples my gods and goddesses had conducted themselves with dignified and divine propriety. The males had broken no heads, and the females—wilfully at least—no hearts. There had been a succession of mild flirtations in the public rooms at the hotels, of the

usual harmless and unmeaning character. Venus never sat down to table without attracting a universal stare of genuine astonishment, which ladies after a while would exchange for glances of polished indifference, and men for looks of open admiration. She held a small court every afternoon before dinner in the saloon or central hall, where she received whatever homage impassioned gestures and imploring eyes can render; but she made no attempt whatever to learn the commonest words or easiest phrases in any European language, and all her conversations on either side were carried on in dumb show. Love passages of such a nature are sometimes amusing, and not unfrequently absurd, but they can hardly be accounted as dangerous.

It struck me, however, as somewhat strange that the fair goddess never encouraged any of her lovers to teach her a few sentences in French or Italian. Half-hours of instruction in a foreign tongue afford delicious moments of sweet and rapidly advancing intimacy; and any one of the enamoured youths who hovered around her chair would have given his eyes to be installed into the office of preceptor. Yet she evinced no sort of desire to learn; and I began at last to fear that there might be some reason for her otherwise rather stupid apathy. Could it be that she had not perhaps entirely forgotten the good looks and winning manners of Lord Alconbury, and

that she hoped to meet him again? I certainly indulged no such hope, nor had I any reason to suppose that so calamitous an event was probable.

Apollo made almost as great havoc among the unmarried ladies as Venus among the men. To the mature spinster he was a darling duck; to the maiden of uncertain age, a most interesting creature; but to many a susceptible young girl, I sadly fear, the inspirer of a hopeless passion. The god himself was absolutely passive, and made no attempt at creating any impression whatever among the travellers whom we chanced to meet at the hotel. It was now thoroughly well understood that we were a company of strolling actors—respectable up to a certain point, but not presenting any very desirable opportunities for matrimonial alliance. If, therefore, his faultless beauty set all the fair sex in a flutter, the fair sex had only itself to thank for not keeping out of the dangerous young man's way. Whether the highly gifted deity maintained a similar attitude of cold reserve towards sundry bright-eyed Neapolitans, or others whom he may have met elsewhere, is a matter which does not concern our present story.

For my own part, I was perfectly astonished at the correctness of my company's behaviour. It seemed almost beyond belief that they should prove so tractable, and that for a clear month at least not one of them should have broken loose,

in his own peculiar line. I had feared that Hercules would be for ever resenting imaginary affronts with blows, perhaps fatal, from his iron fist; that Bacchus would drink at every tavern to scandalous excess; that Mercury, from sheer force of habit, would pilfer right and left; and that the mad pranks of my young friend Cupid would involve me in perpetual trouble. Not one of these things happened, and I can only account for such admirable self-control by regarding it as a wholesome effect of our plays and recitations. With the exception of Diana, to whom little attention was paid, each deity took an obvious delight in receiving, night after night, the homage of so many thousand mortals; and each one knew, also, that the indulgence of any foolish freak or eccentricity which might attract the notice of the police would be fatal to the maintenance of their dignity as dwellers upon Mount Olympus. I had, moreover, thoroughly impressed upon their minds that upon the success of the exhibition depended their enjoyment of the subsequent tour. The ordeal became tedious after a while, and they were doubtless glad to be released from their nightly posings; but so long as the performances lasted they did their work conscientiously, and did it well.

When, at the termination of one week at Milan, we began the forty days of promised pleasure, the rapidity of our movements and the excitement of novel scenes acted as a similar safeguard. We

stopped nowhere between Venice and Munich, or between Munich and Dresden, or between Dresden and Paris. At each of these places our time was wholly taken up with sight-seeing, and there is little opportunity for getting into social scrapes during a long journey by train. On reaching Paris we were all tired out with incessant travelling, and I willingly acquiesced in the general desire for a week of well-earned repose.

We put up at the "Louvre"—which in the good old days, before the "Grands Magasins" elbowed it out, was the best hotel in Europe—and Bacchus drank his first bottle of honest *vin ordinaire*. He appreciated it so highly that he drank a second, and then a third—at which point I always interfered, bidding my friend "think of his head the next morning."

We sat at the end of one of the long parallel tables, occupying a corner of the dining-hall near the door. In the opposite corner sat a well-dressed young man, who appeared to regard our group with considerable interest, though the distance was too great to enable me to make out his features. It was nothing new that men should stare at Venus, or indeed at any other member of the party—the whole room did it everywhere, as a matter of course. But this man did more than stare—he left his food for staring. Venus also, though she usually enjoyed her dinner—and the cooking was in the present case exceptionally

good—bowed a preoccupied refusal to almost every dish they brought her, and stole repeated glances diagonally across the room. Among the first to leave the table was the gentleman in the farther corner, whom I recognised, the moment he stood upright, as Lord Alconbury.

I felt extremely annoyed, but there was little to be gained by betraying my annoyance, and I received him with the blandest of professional smiles. If a personal conductor be not polite, he is nothing. Ladies and gentlemen are happily unaware how much it costs to have a civil answer always on the tongue for Mr. 'Arry Belleville.

"I say, you Mister What's your Name—I serpose it isn't Cook—'ow many pounds of bacca can I safely smuggle through at Cally if I 'old a bag of it in my 'and?"

"I don't care a 'ang whether you've 'ad yer own dinner or not; you're 'ere to wait upon the party, and I want to know 'ow much backsheesh I'm to give to this 'ere bloomin' Arab."

"Look 'ere—my 'orse 'as got a leech in 'is mouth. When yer've *quite* done fixin' up them young ladies in their saddles, yer know, p'raps yer'll come round and take it out for me. And I think yer might find us some puddles for our 'orses to drink at that 'ain't chock-full of leeches."

A man who has to endure this sort of thing every day for three months on end, and endure it with even temper, finds no great difficulty in

composing his features into a smile when he is addressed by a gentleman.

"Unexpected pleasure, my lord," I was humbug enough to say. "Are you on your way to England?"

"No; on the contrary, I've just come out. Had some idea of joining a friend at the Lakes. Shall you be there?"

"I think not," answered I. "We only arrived from Dresden yesterday, and we have a great deal to see. When we do turn our faces homewards, we shall make pretty straight for Athens."

"Heard all about your triumphs in Italy," said Lord Alconbury, sitting down by Venus in the corridor. His lordship must have known pretty well by this time that she was by way of being on the stage; though how far the discovery might be in her favour or not was more than I could foresee.

Venus welcomed her steamboat acquaintance with undisguised pleasure. The poor girl had not spoken a word of her own language to anyone except myself for six clear weeks, and she was dying for a little sympathetic converse. Lord Alconbury could give her this at any rate, and she made no secret of her delight on meeting him again.

"And do you still persist in having no name or surname?" asked he, when the first ceremonious

stiffness between them had worn off and they had settled down into their old familiar relations. Venus had reconsidered her position in this respect, possibly from a sense of the barrier it placed between herself and her lover. I signed a certain set of names for them in the visitors' books, which they privately disowned; but the goddess now, for reasons of her own, thought better of it, and was glad to shelter herself behind my innocent fabrication.

"Oh, that was a little joke of mine, you know," she replied, blushing. "Of course I've got a name, but I shan't tell you what it is. You can find it out at the bureau. It's a very ugly one."

Lord Alconbury was evidently relieved. "Ugly or pretty," said he, "I shall never call you by it. You will always be Venus to me."

And so they went on every day for a week, plunging deeper and deeper into the quicksands, until at last she swore that she would be Venus to him for ever; and he held her in his arms, and vowed before heaven that no power on earth should part them. It was very horrible, but what could a poor personal conductor do?

"If you only knew what I could tell you, my lord," said I, "or if you would only believe a tenth part of it when told, you'd sooner put your own eyes out than look at her again."

"That sounds very melodramatic," he replied, with the suspicion of a sneer; "but when a man

is fond of a woman, he isn't going to be frightened away from her by mysterious and indefinite warnings. If you'll talk plain English instead of melodrama, and tell me who she is and where she lives and what sort of people she comes from, I'll break the thing off this minute, supposing it turns out to be a thing which I can't honourably carry through."

"You wouldn't believe a word I said, my lord, and you'd have me put under restraint before this time to-morrow morning; and I prefer my liberty. I have said all that it's possible to say, and said it as earnestly as I know how; and if you won't listen to me, there is nothing left for me to do but to oppose the match by every means in my power."

"No opposition on your part can make the slightest difference," said he, "except to produce unpleasantness between you and me. I'd marry her straight off to-morrow at the Embassy, only that, for family reasons, I am bound to see my own man of business first. I shall meet him at the Lakes in a day or two; and when everything is settled, I shall come back to London and find her out, and make her my wife with the least possible delay."

This was the last Saturday in April, and my deities were due at Ganymede's shed exactly five weeks hence, on the last Saturday in May. Venus would never dare to disobey the decree, and eight days for safety must be allowed between London

and the Piraeus. If good luck would only help me to keep Lord Alconbury away from her for seven-and-twenty days, I might yet save the lovely goddess from thunderbolts, and his lordship from a colossal horror.

CHAPTER XIII.

APOLLO AND MARSYAS.

I CANNOT say that my male divinities maintained in Paris the same dignified and correct demeanour which had won my grateful admiration in Italy. They broke out more than once with rampagious playfulness; and for every one of them, except the steady-going old Father Neptune, I had a heavy bill to pay by way of setting things straight again. A trifling indiscretion on the part of Apollo, a theft on that of Mercury, a boyish freak performed by Cupid, an insult offered by Bacchus while under the influence of drink, and an ill-judged feat of strength achieved by Hercules—compensation for all these eccentricities of celestial conduct had to be liberally paid before we were permitted to resume our journey. However, we parted on good terms with the Parisian world at last; and the improprieties of my friends were so absolutely insignificant, when compared with this gigantic folly of Venus, that I could not find it in my heart to scold them.

We "descended," as the French say, at the Charing Cross Hotel; but I did not propose to

remain there, as there seemed a better chance of avoiding Lord Alconbury if we lost ourselves in a labyrinth of lodgings. It was but a chance, of course, since the lovers might correspond, for aught I knew; and yet Venus, though clever in many ways, was altogether green in London, and would be more likely to make a mistake about a street or the number of a door than about the name of a first-class hotel. In a couple of days I had secured a charming set of rooms in a quiet street at the West End, where we made ourselves tolerably comfortable. Curiosity to see the great sights of mighty London stood my friend for about a week, during which time the deities were too much occupied to get into mischief, and all went smoothly.

One afternoon I hired a brake and took my gods and goddesses for a long drive in the country, by way of impressing their minds with the almost boundless extent of the Metropolis. On our return we passed a pretty little suburban villa, surprisingly close to the smoky town itself, and yet so completely surrounded with copse and shrubbery that it might have been transported from some Berkshire village. In front of the house was a well-kept lawn, and a diminutive lake on which a pair of swans sailed slowly. Between the water and the carriage-drive which led to the front-door a few cows and sheep were grazing; and in a tiny paddock beyond the lawn, railed off by a wooden

fence, three deer lay reposing on the turf, while a stag rubbed his antlers against the trunk of an ornamental tree.

"What a lovely creature!" exclaimed Diana, who had never seen an English stag before. "Oh, how I should like to hunt him!"

"Hunt him?" I repeated. "Why, he's tame—probably eats out of the children's hands. You surely wouldn't hunt a pet animal like that. You might as well hunt a sheep or a swan."

"I'd hunt anything," returned the goddess, "that runs or flies. And oh, Praxy! I haven't shot off an arrow since we left Olympus."

"I am afraid, dear lady, you must wait till you get back again. There is no hunting to be got in London."

"What's the name of that place?" asked the goddess. "It's so pretty; I wish we lived there."

"'The Thorns, Walford Road,'" I replied, reading off the big letters on the gate-post as we passed along.

"Write it down for me, Praxy. I'll call one of my preserves by the same name when I get home."

Smiling at her enthusiasm, I scribbled the four words on the inside of an envelope and passed it to her. Diana stood up in the brake to catch a last glimpse of the stag's horns between the trees, and talked of nothing else but his beauty and the pleasures of the chase until we reached our lodgings.

On the tenth evening after our arrival Apollo expressed a strong desire to see one of our monster music-halls, and I suggested a promenade concert at the Sapphic. Diana, Mercury, and Hercules declined to go, on the ground that they could not endure the heat, and Venus made a similar excuse in consideration of a pretended headache; but the four remaining gods, accompanied by myself, went off soon after six to dine at a restaurant in Piccadilly, and adjourned to the Sapphic later on. The music and singing were both of an attractive order, and the hall was fairly crowded.

"You are never going to take your guitar?" said I to Apollo, as he appeared at the bottom of the staircase in our lodgings with the instrument in its case. "They won't let you play it at the Sapphic, and it will be most frightfully in the way."

"Give you a song in the cab, you know, as we bowl along," answered the god. "It's a week or more since I touched the strings, and this evening I feel musical."

"I strongly recommend you to leave the thing at home," said I; "but if you choose to be bothered with it, come along."

We called a couple of hansoms, into one of which got Neptune and Apollo, while Bacchus and myself occupied the other, taking Cupid between us. As we skirted the Park on our way to

Piccadilly, melodious strains were heard issuing from the vehicle in front; the driver holding his trap-door continually open, and peeping down with evident astonishment at his accomplished fare.

"Of course you'll leave that blessed instrument in the cloak-room," said I, as we took our tickets at the entrance.

"Cloak-room be hanged!" was the reply; "I mean to keep it with me."

"The doorkeeper won't let you in, my good fellow. Take my advice, and get rid of it."

"He'll only think I'm an *artiste, mon ami,* and that I've come to the wrong door." And so, to my great regret, he did. I could not bring myself to make mischief by betraying my friend, though I felt an uneasy presentiment that worse mischief would come of his being permitted to enter a music-hall with his attribute in his hand.

About ten o'clock an Italian, who was beginning to create some little sensation in London, stepped forward to play a solo on the flute, accompanied by a harp and pianoforte. He was quite comically ugly, and no longer young; but his command of the instrument was undeniable—his lip firm, his tone full and reedy, and his execution crisp and clean.

"Where have I seen that fellow before?" said Apollo. "I swear I know his face."

"Impossible," I replied. "He was engaged in London all the time we were in Italy, and

that's the only place where you could have met him."

"It wasn't Italy," said Apollo, "it was Phrygia; I remember all about it now. It's that hideous devil Marsyas. I skinned him once; and, by Jove! if he doesn't play better than that, I'll skin him again."

"Don't make an idiot of yourself!" said I, becoming alarmed at his excited manner. "The man is playing well enough, and if you interrupt him you'll get into a thundering row. Just please to recollect that you're not at Naples, but in England, and you can't play tricks with Londoners."

Apollo made no answer, but he riveted his eyes upon the flute-player, and I could see that, in spite of his outward calmness, he was inwardly working himself up into a state of frenzy. I seized his hand, and whispered imploringly into his ear, and did all in my power to pacify him; but he appeared to have transported himself into another world, and to be incapable of heeding me. Towards the end of the performance he broke suddenly away, in defiance of all that Neptune and I could do to hold him; and having succeeded, to my great surprise, in creeping stealthily, unopposed, through the crowd in front of us, he stood for a few minutes motionless at the foot of the platform.

The flute solo was enthusiastically encored, and it became evident that the Italian would

have to play again. He stood in the accustomed posture, with a smirk upon his face and his hand upon his heart, bowing his acknowledgments to the enraptured throng, until the last of the cheers had almost died away, when he moved sideways towards the pianoforte to give instructions to his accompanists about a change of pieces for the encore. The lady at the harp was not ready with her music, and the German at the pianoforte, in rising from his stool to help her, scattered the contents of his own portfolio upon the floor; and the three bungled over their arrangements to a degree which soon began to evoke manifest signs of impatience in various portions of the hall. Some few roughs in the gallery had already begun to hiss in token of displeasure, when Apollo seized the precise moment for creating a diversion, sprang upon the platform at a bound, drew out his guitar, letting the case of the instrument fall to the ground, and struck a succession of chords, so masterly in their handling, so marvellous in their rich and ringing tone, that a sudden shout of positively deafening applause filled all the air.

The manager of course stepped forward to expostulate, and beckoned to some policemen to assist him in carrying out his programme; but the police themselves stood listening like men bewitched, and nobody evinced the faintest desire that they should interfere. The uproar ceased, the manager bowed his submission to the popular

will, the instrumentalists went on bungling over their portfolios, and Apollo was left in possession of the field. Sweeping the strings once more with the same thrilling touch of hand, he sang, in a voice such as never yet fell upon mortal ear, the most wonderfully beautiful melody that Euterpe ever played upon the flute or Erato on the lyre. It must have been in Olympus that he learnt it, and the entire audience bore testimony, by their breathless and reverent silence, that they were listening to a voice divine.

The song was short—too short for the delighted multitude, and it goes without saying that they demanded an encore. During an ovation which lasted several minutes, Apollo stood radiant with joy and triumph, but never bowed; and at length, apparently with a view to restoring tranquillity, he raised his head as if he were going to sing again, and began fingering his guitar. When every voice was hushed and every ear was strained to catch the first accents of the song, the god suddenly dropped his left hand to his side and stepped forward to the edge of the platform.

"Praxy," he called out in Greek, "they like me best, don't they?"

"Certainly," answered I; "but please look sharp and come down again. We all want to be going home."

"And the victory is clearly mine, isn't it, Praxy?"

"Of course it is," I replied.

"And the other fellow is nowhere?"

"Nowhere at all," I assented, like an ass; for I ought to have suspected his meaning.

"Then I shall skin him!" cried the god; and in a moment he had laid his guitar upon the top of the pianoforte, seized the unhappy Italian by the throat, torn open his shirt and waistcoat, and begun to feel in his own pocket for a knife or some such weapon with which to commence the classical operation.

The police interfered now promptly enough, and it is needless to relate that the Italian was speedily rescued, and his assailant removed in custody. There was no further question of encores. Apollo had been guilty of an unprovoked and murderous assault, and he must take the consequences. By this time, however, he had worked himself up into a state of excitement which bordered closely on insanity, and he struggled so desperately as he was being led away that it took three strong men to hold him. The audience now woke up to a knowledge of the uncomfortable fact that they had been lashed into ecstasies by the ravings of a madman, and everybody confided to everybody else that he had guessed as much from the beginning. Whether the poor wretched Italian was readmitted into popular favour we did not remain long enough to ascertain.

The police succeeded with much difficulty in squeezing Apollo into a four-wheeler, and the rest

of us followed them to the station in another. On arrival it was clear to the meanest intelligence that the deity had gone completely off his head, and that he was absolutely irresponsible. He raved wildly about his contest with Marsyas, and laughed exultingly over the agonies of his rival as he went through the mimic action of flaying the presumptuous Satyr alive.

I entreated that the medical officer might be summoned immediately, and the police inspector promised that it should be done; but he flatly refused permission to any of us, at so late an hour of the night, to await the doctor's arrival, and we were forced to content ourselves with the assurance that all possible kindness should be shown meanwhile to our unhappy friend.

So we drove back again to our lodgings, sore at heart, for this was our first real trouble. Ah me! if it could only have been the last! The suddenness as well as the sadness of the calamity touched us all more deeply than I can tell. Neptune bent his head forward upon his shaggy beard and groaned aloud in sympathy with the imprisoned god. Even the light-hearted Bacchus was moved to sighing, while Cupid leant his head upon my shoulder and cried bitterly. Poor boy! they were genuine tears this time, and I thought I should never comfort him. It was a terrible piece of news we had to tell when we reached our home; but there was worse for us to hear.

CHAPTER XIV.

DIANA GOES OUT HUNTING.

We did not reach our lodgings until nearly twelve o'clock, by which time everybody appeared to be in bed, and the house as silent as an Etruscan tomb. On mounting the stairs, however, we discovered that Venus was the only one of the party who had retired, and that the rooms of the remaining three were empty. I sent Cupid in to his Mummy to find out whether she knew anything of their movements; but the goddess was sleepy, and her boy received an indifferent welcome.

"She's as cross as Vulcan's tongs and shovel," said Cupid, caressing the cheek which his mother had smacked for him. "She doesn't know where they're gone, and doesn't care."

"Then I suppose she won't care to be told about poor Apollo," said I, "so we will refrain from distressing her. Good-night, everybody. I I must sit up to let the others in."

"Let me sit up with you, Praxy," said Cupid.

"Certainly not," answered I; "be off at once to by-by." And in ten minutes I was keeping watch alone.

About half-past twelve I heard in the distance the clattering of horses' feet—the sound growing gradually clearer, until the hoofs stamped finally in front of the drawing-room window. The bell rang sharply, and I ran down at once to open the door.

"What! all alone, Mercury?" I exclaimed. "Where are the others?"

"I am faint and sick," said Mercury in a hoarse and feeble voice. "Get me a glass of wine, for pity's sake, and then I'll try to tell you."

I saw that something very terrible had taken place, but I curbed my impatience, and went into the dining-room to fetch the wine. Mercury followed me, sinking wearily into a chair; and as I struck a light, I dropped the match with horror at the patches and streaks of blood which stained his cheeks, his shirt-front, and his hands.

It was five minutes or so before he was sufficiently composed to tell his story. Meanwhile I had opened the front door to cool myself in the night air, for the dread of what was coming had sent me into a fever. I looked round for Mercury's horse, but there was no such animal to be seen; and I concluded that he had found his way back to the stable. Then I returned into the dining-room, and this is the tale I heard.

Soon after seven o'clock on this unlucky even-

ing, the gods and goddesses who had not accompanied me to the Sapphic sat down to dinner. When the meal was over Venus went to lie down; while Diana, Mercury, and Hercules adjourned to the sitting-room on the first floor.

"Now!" cried Diana, clapping her two companions on the shoulder and pacing excitedly up and down the room—"now I can put into execution my little plan. I haven't had a scrap of real enjoyment since we came out. All the adulation of the mortals at those theatres in Italy was offered to Venus, or Apollo, or that detestable little idiot Cupid, and none to me. I've been shoved into the background from first to last, and I won't stand it any longer. What! am I old and ugly? I'll let them know at any rate that I'm not old. I mean to have a jolly spree to-night, and you two must help me."

"Werry much at your sarvice, marm," said Hercules, clenching his fist and squaring his elbow by way of indicating the sort of service which he was best able to render.

"Proud to be of any assistance to you, my lady," added Mercury, his right hand instinctively clutching at his trousers pocket for a similar reason.

"My pug will be having puppies about the time we get back to Olympus," said Diana. "You two shall have your pick of the ugliest in the litter." The god and demi-god inclined their

heads, words failing them to express their appreciation of so munificent a reward.

"You recollect," continued the fair huntress, drawing a piece of paper from her chaste bosom —"you recollect a pretty place that we passed one afternoon last week on our way back from the country. Praxy wrote down the name of it for me, little suspecting what use I should make of the information. I don't know how to pronounce the words myself, but any cabman, I suppose, will be able to read the address quite easily. Well, I bought a bow and arrows yesterday, and I'm going there to-night to shoot that stag."

"But Praxy says it's tame," objected Mercury.

"I'll make it wild enough, by the time I've chased it three or four hundred yards up and down the shrubbery. If Praxy thinks I'm going back to Olympus before I've had some sport, Praxy's very much mistaken."

"And what can I do to help you?" asked the messenger of the gods.

"Steal me a horse, old fellow, so that I may gallop across those fields in style, with the stag in front of me. It's going to be a beautiful starlight night, and I don't want the moon."

"You'll be caught, to a certainty," said Mercury.

"I'm not so easily caught, and the mortals are middling stupid."

"It's dangerous work, my lady. Praxy says that the game in this country is sacred, and poaching the worst offence, next to murder, that any man can commit. Though the deer are tame, this sort of trespass will perhaps count as poaching, and goodness only knows what they may do to you."

"Hercules will see to that," said Diana, turning with a smile of confidence to her champion. "Won't you, old man?"

"Well, marm," replied the giant, squeezing the knotted muscles on his arm, "the man as blocks the way, when you wants to pass, had better have stayed at 'ome to mind the baby."

"And where am I to find a horse?" enquired Mercury, who did not half like the job, but was unwilling to offend the goddess by saying so.

"There are sure to be stables in the country close by," said Diana. "Don't you go raising difficulties."

"Can't promise a side-saddle," said Mercury again.

"I beg you won't mention it," was the reply. "One seat is the same to me as another."

Diana fetched her bow and arrows—an undersized and not very formidable set of weapons, which she had purchased for a few shillings at a toy-shop in Tottenham Court Road. I was obliged to make my deities a small allowance; but I gave them as little as possible, and their

finances did not admit of any expensive indulgences. They then called a cab, handed the name of their destination to the driver, and bargained with him by means of signs and symbols for the amount of the fare. "The Thorns" was reached at half-past ten o'clock, the cabby looking with undisguised suspicion at the three adventurers as he put them down outside the garden gate at the corner of a lonely lane.

"There's a-goin' to be a burglary on these 'ere premises," muttered the cabby to himself, shaking his head solemnly at the depravity of all mankind. "I've 'alf a mind to give information to the perlice. It might stand me in a pint of beer."

Mercury went off to steal the horse, while Hercules and the Queen of the Night enjoyed a quiet stroll along the high-road. Turning presently into a scanty copse, the demi-god seized the opportunity of securing a serviceable attribute. With one tug of his left hand he tore up a young ash-tree by the roots, and soon fashioned it into the form of a terrific club, at the sight of which even the Hydra might have turned its nine heads away.

"If that 'ere sprig of timber don't settle their 'ash, marm," observed the hero, as he tossed his toy into the air and caught it by the handle, "I must take to strangling."

"Don't you be too violent, my friend," said

Diana, by way of caution. "A gentle tap will be quite sufficient, just to let them know you're there."

"A gentle tap is all that any on 'em shall get, marm, you may be sure. But a gentle tap from the club of 'Erkiles is a compliment as don't often require to be paid twice over."

"Listen!" said Diana; "I can hear a horse cantering on the turf. Let us go back to the rendezvous and see whether it is Mercury."

It was Mercury sure enough, and a sturdy little cob he had brought—just the very thing for a lady to ride in a small park by starlight. The goddess mounted her steed, received her bow and arrows from the hands of her attendant squires, shook down her skirts to satisfy the prim proprieties, and declared herself ready for action.

There was no difficulty about opening the gate, which was simply latched; and they followed boldly the carriage-drive along the shrubbery, until they reached the pond. Here the goddess dismounted, and bade Mercury hold her horse, while she sped across the lawn to the paddock and set free the deer. A gate opened in the fence, and in a corner of the paddock was a thatched wooden shed, in which the deer were slumbering.

Diana stirred them up with the point of an arrow, and sent the creatures bounding one after another through the door of the shed, and then

through that of the fence, which she closed behind them. The palings were purposely made too high for them to jump, so she had them now at her mercy in the open field. Running back to her companions, she sprang quickly upon the horse's back and galloped after the frightened deer as fast as the faint starlight would permit her, letting fly an arrow whenever she saw a chance of hitting. After two or three scurries up and down the field, the stag made a desperate rush for the paddock fence, and Diana brought him down with a wound in one of his front knees.

By this time dogs had begun to bark, and bells to ring, and lights to appear in the front windows of the house, and the fair huntress had scarcely dismounted from her steed by the side of the fallen stag when she was seized with no great tenderness by the wrist, and asked in the plainest of bucolic English what the devil she was doing. By way of answer she shouted to her companions, who came running across the lawn.

"Take your 'ans off that lady this instant!" cried Hercules, forgetting that the man could not understand him.

"You cursed poaching vagabonds!" was the rejoinder. "So there's three of you, is there? Well, me and my mates 'll be enough to hold the lot till such time as the boy can fetch the constable."

Hercules wasted no further words; but as the speaker showed no disposition to let Diana go, he swung his club once or twice round his head, and brought it down with a fearful crash upon the man's left ear, breaking the arm which he put up in self-defence and dashing him to the ground. So firm was his grip of Diana's wrist that the goddess fell with him; and Mercury, in stooping over to extricate her from the corpse, bathed his hands in the blood of the slain.

Other men now issued from the house, bearing sticks and lanterns, but they had no fire-arms, and they would probably have shared the luckless fate of their leader, had not a reinforcement arrived suddenly from the other side. No less than eight policemen, who had been sent from different quarters by the cabby, and had joined forces on the way, entered unnoticed by the front gate, and stole quietly in the darkness across the lawn. The deities were all looking towards the house, and the policemen, gauging at a glance the colossal strength of Hercules, rushed on him in a body from behind, and secured him before he could strike a blow. Even with the aid of this stratagem, it required seven men to hold him, while the eighth took possession of Diana, whose bow and arrows betrayed her. Mercury, who in the confusion was overlooked, with great adroitness jumped on the horse's back, and succeeded, after an infinity of

false turnings, in finding his way back to our rooms. His bloodstained hands and generally suspicious appearance made it impossible that he should ever seek guidance from a policeman; but here and there he met some solitary genius of the midnight streets just sober enough to know his right hand from his left, who gave him such information as he desired.

This was a pretty story for a personal conductor to hear! And a personal conductor of gods and goddesses, too! Was ever mortal man in such a plight? And how in the name of heaven and earth was the thing to end?

Small chance now of keeping the appointment at Ganymede's shed on the last Saturday of the month. By that time one of my deities would be in a madhouse, another in the condemned cell, a third in prison for night trespass, and a fourth, — for it seemed highly improbable that Mercury could be screened — sharing the same fate as an accessory. And what would Jupiter do when he discovered that four of his divinities were missing? And what would become of poor simple-minded Hercules after he were hanged? Could they really hang him—a demi-god—one of the dread immortals? The complicated horrors of the whole situation nearly turned my brain.

I need hardly say that, like the typical lover in the three-volume novel, I "retired to bed, but not to rest." Sheets and counterpanes could

not hold a body that tossed so frantically from side to side; and most of my night was spent in learning to make a bed, and then demolishing the frail structure by kicking the materials once again on to the floor. Never in my life did I so thankfully hail the moment "when daylight doth appear"; but as I went about my toilet I scarcely knew my face, for the mute wail of untold agony with which every feature seemed to cry.

CHAPTER XV.

CUPID GOES OUT SHOOTING.

THE question of Mercury's imprisonment or freedom was settled sooner than I expected. A policeman on night duty had seen the horse stop at our front door; another, not far off, had caught the riderless animal as he drooped wearily along the streets, and noticing marks of blood upon his saddle and bridle, had detained him until the morning; a third had discovered the name and address of his owner stamped upon the stirrup-leathers, whereupon it needed only an exchange of telegraphic messages to establish beyond a doubt that the creature must have been stolen by the same individual who had ridden him to our lodgings. I had scarcely finished dressing, therefore, when a couple of bobbies arrived with anxious enquiries for the horse's rider, and there were no possible means of declining to produce him. Poor Mercury was desired to dress himself with all decent haste, and to walk under escort to the police station. For the present he was only charged with theft, but it appeared almost certain that he would be likewise implicated in the outrage at "The Thorns."

In spite of the immeasurably greater importance of the last-named tragedy, I felt that my first duty was to my poor friend Apollo, and I determined to satisfy myself about his fate immediately after breakfast, taking Cupid with me. The deities had been going to such frightful grief of late that it was impossible to guess which of them would be the next to fall; but the boy must at any rate be kept out of mischief, and as he was the most wayward of the bunch, he should never leave my side again.

The meal was not a very cheerful one, though Venus had lost her headache and recovered her good humour. "Diana is late this morning," said the goddess, with the conscious virtue of one who has risen, by accident, half-an-hour earlier than usual; "and where are Hercules and Mercury and Apollo?"

I sobbed over my tea-cup as I told her of our misadventure at the Sapphic, and made her understand that the bright god of music had passed the night at a police station, and would probably be lodged this morning in an asylum.

"Re-ally!" said Venus, with an aristocratic drawl. "How very odd of Apollo! Shall I trouble you to pass the marmalade?"

"There's worse to come," said I, as I complied with her request; "but I think I'll tell you the rest another time. I should be sorry to spoil your appetite for the jam."

"Out with it, Praxy! There's no time like the present, and there are few things I dislike so much as being kept in suspense."

She was absolutely heartless, so I let her have it at a crash, without mincing my words. "Hercules has been arrested for murder," said I, "and Diana for night-trespass, and Mercury for stealing; and they are all three in prison."

"No—really!" drawled Venus again. "How very odd of them!"

"What can you possibly mean?" exclaimed Neptune, pushing back his chair with a look of bewildered horror, and brushing a small avalanche of bread-crumbs from his shaggy beard.

"You must be laughing at us!" said Bacchus, turning as pale as deep purple-red is capable of turning, and hastily leaving the room in order to satisfy himself that his comrades were not safe upstairs.

"O Praxy!" cried Cupid, jumping up from his seat and standing against my chair—"O Praxy! it can't be true!" and the poor boy burst into a flood of tears.

"Go back to your place, Q," said Venus, "and finish your breakfast; you know how much I hate a scene."

"O Mummy! I can't eat any more," pleaded the boy, still leaning upon my shoulder. "Tell us all about it, Praxy; it's best to know."

By this time Bacchus had returned, looking

unnaturally solemn, and shaking his head sadly in response to a mute enquiry from the ancient god. They pressed me then to tell my story, which I did as coherently as my own emotion and theirs permitted; but I think that even their piteous moaning sorrow distressed me less than the selfish unconcern of Venus, who ate her bread and marmalade and sipped her tea as coolly as if I had been relating a visit to the monkeys at the Zoo. I verily believe that she was just now incapable of any other thought except the gratification of her senseless passion for Lord Alconbury.

It was a positive relief to get away from her; and as I was anxious to learn the worst about Apollo, I drove to the police station where we had left him, accompanied by Cupid, and was admitted at once into the doctor's room. He assured me that his patient was hopelessly insane, and that he had already signed a certificate to that effect. Having committed an assault, he must be taken, as a matter of form, before the police magistrate; but the proceedings would be very short, and he would almost instantly be removed to Hanwell.

"Can he go to a private asylum, if his friends are willing to pay for him?" I enquired.

"Certainly; but I should advise you to leave him at Hanwell for the present. He will be treated with the greatest possible kindness, and

you can make other arrangements for him afterwards, if he appears to need a change."

At the police court I offered my services as interpreter, wishing to avoid delay, and knowing that it is not always easy in London to pick up anyone who can talk Greek at a few minutes' notice. Apollo recognised me the moment I began to speak, and would have jumped across the benches to greet me had he not been restrained. He was full of the old subject, and had evidently got Marsyas on the brain.

"Is he dead yet, Praxy? I came away before I had half done skinning him. Let's have him in here, Praxy, and finish him off straight away."

"He fancies he's Apollo, sir," said I, by way of explaining the poor fellow's excited manner.

"And not at all a bad imitation either," said the magistrate, "if the classical traditions are true. What's his real name?"

I gave the name which I had invented for the god, and his examination began. It was interrupted, however, by a desperate effort on the madman's part to get at Cupid, whom I had placed in the background of the court, vainly hoping that he would not be perceived.

"What's the matter now?" asked the magistrate, as Cupid pushed his way forward in answer to the god's appeal.

"He thinks the boy is Cupid, sir," said I.

"And upon my honour I should have thought the same! It isn't often one sees two such faces and figures in a police court. Verily, the gods have come down to us this morning in the likeness of men."

"Now, Praxy, I'm going to sing a song," cried Apollo; but before he could commence it he was hurried out of the court, and the next case began. We were allowed to say good-bye to him in a private room, and the farewell scene between him and Cupid was inexpressibly touching.

We then drove to the court in which Hercules and his companions would be brought up, and arrived just as the case was on the point of being postponed, for want of an interpreter. I explained to the magistrate the relation in which I stood to the prisoners, and handed in their names. The preliminary examination was then continued, and when it was over I was permitted to speak for a few minutes with my unhappy friends. I said, of course, all that I could to comfort them, but my chief desire was to impress upon Hercules the necessity of quiet and dignified behaviour. Hitherto he had been so violent that they were obliged to chain him hand and foot, and three men stood on either side of him in the police court. I made him understand that this sort of conduct would seriously damage his cause, and the poor fellow promised me at last that in future he would be as gentle as a lamb.

The victim of the demi-god's zeal in defence of his chaste mistress turned out to be the head-gardener at "The Thorns." He was a coarse, ill-tempered old fellow, who drank, and beat his wife, and bullied his children; and nobody except himself was much the worse for his removal. Of course there was an inquest, at which also I interpreted; but I have not the heart to recount the details of those dreadful days. The facts in each case were too clearly beyond dispute; the coroner's jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against Hercules, and he was committed to take his trial at the Central Criminal Court on the 25th of May. At the same time Diana was to be tried for the night-trespass, and Mercury as an accessory to the last-named offence, and for horse-stealing.

I secured, of course, the best legal advice that money would obtain, but my solicitor gave me little hope that any jury would be persuaded to take a lenient view of the capital crime. Every effort would naturally be made to reduce the murder to manslaughter, and the prisoners would have the benefit of such allowance as is usually accorded to strangers, who are in supposed ignorance of the laws of a foreign country. The assault, however, had been so brutal, so cold-blooded, and so unprovoked that the extreme penalty of the law would almost certainly be inflicted.

All day long, for two weary weeks, I was

backwards and forwards in the City, visiting my imprisoned friends, or closeted with my solicitor on their behalf, or devising impossible schemes for their liberation, or running down to Hanwell for a short interview with Apollo.

At first I took Cupid with me, fearing to trust him out of my sight; but this sort of life was poor fun for a high-spirited boy of fourteen, and he soon began to show signs of being bored. After a few days, therefore, I left him at home with Bacchus and Neptune, sketching out every morning after breakfast a plan for their employment of the day, and leaving them a sufficient sum of money to pay for cabs, admission to places of amusement, and short railway journeys. My one object was to keep Cupid out of mischief, and in charge of a steady old buffer like Neptune he could scarcely come to harm.

Bacchus, however, when freed from the restraint of my continual presence, became a source of serious anxiety. He was a good-hearted fellow, and appeared altogether inconsolable at the calamities which had befallen his friends; but the means by which he sought consolation were hardly such as I could approve. For three successive evenings, on my return from Hanwell or the City, he failed to appear at dinner, having broken away from his companions at some point of the day's excursion, and gone off nobody knew where. It turned out afterwards that he had discovered

some place in the neighbourhood of the Haymarket where Italian wine was sold, and here he sat drinking until they turned him out into the street, when he was dragged away to the police station. The first two mornings he was let off with a caution, not a word of which he could understand; and as I did not know to which of the courts he would be brought up, I could not be there to help him. On the third occasion, however, I attended as interpreter, and was instructed to inform my friend that, if he appeared before the magistrate again, he would be sent to prison as an incorrigible drunkard. Bacchus, now thoroughly frightened, swore solemnly that he would drink no more, and kept his resolution, as such men do, for two whole days. On the third night he drank harder than ever, and on the following morning was ordered to be locked up for a fortnight.

This happened on the 21st of May, four days before the trial. Towards six o'clock on the evening of the 22nd I was returning home in a hansom, when I observed in front of me, just outside the railings of St. James's Park, a boy, in brown stockings and knicker-bockers, whose figure I seemed to know. On either side of him walked a policeman, one of whom held in his hand a wooden implement which looked suspiciously like a catapult, and the other a small canvas bag. The boy was weeping bitterly, and apparently looking

round with imploring eyes for help, but finding none.

I pulled up the cab, sprang out on to the road, and rushed towards the group on the footway, in very little more than the typical "moment" which the hero of the three-volume novel expends on similar feats of agility. The boy turned his head, flung wide his arms, and raised his voice with such a cry of joyous recognition that the policemen let him have his way, and permitted him to fling himself upon my breast and hug me as I had never been hugged before.

"O Praxy, Praxy! save me from these horrid men! They want to take me somewhere—is it to prison, Praxy? Oh, save me, save me, and let me go home with you!"

"My dear boy, I cannot possibly save you, if they insist on taking you away. What has he been doing?" I asked, addressing one of the policemen. "He belongs to me."

"Smashing half the lamps in the Park with this precious catapult, sir; that's what he's been doing. The thing has been going on for some days, but we could never find out who did it. Now we've caught the young rascal, and we mean to lock him up."

"Couldn't anything be arranged?" pleaded I. "He's a good boy, if you only knew him; but I've been obliged lately to leave him very much alone,

and he has got into mischief. He is a Greek, you see, and doesn't know our laws."

"Very sorry, sir; it's a hard case, I admit, and as fine-looking a lad as ever I set eyes on; but really and truly we can't let him go. He must come along with us for this evening at least, and let us hope that his worship will make it easy for him in the morning. With all these broken lamps about, we should get ourselves into a row if we didn't lock him up. I am sure you must feel that yourself, sir. And the lamps isn't the worst part of it—there's other things besides."

What the man said was all too true, and I saw that nothing could be done. "Oh, my boy, my boy! what ever did you do it for?" I cried in agony, omitting, however, to tear my hair. The ejaculation was not very original, but I could think of nothing else to say.

"It was so deadly dull without you, Praxy. I couldn't stay mooning about all day with old Daddy Neptune, and Mummy would hardly speak to me; so I bought a catapult and a bag of ammunition, and went out shooting. O Praxy," said the little rogue, smiling through his tears, "it *was* such fun!"

I saw the poor child safely lodged in his quarters for the night, and would gladly have shared his imprisonment, if they would have let me. But I soon had to tear myself away, and

walk home to eat my dinner with such appetite as an accumulation of miseries might bring.

This last, so far as it touched me personally, was the most terrible blow of all. From the memorable evening in Olympus when he flew out of the cloud and perched himself on my back Cupid and I had always been good friends, and a brighter little friend or a more cheerful companion no man ever had. Besides, he was so young and wayward and thoughtless, that I felt as if he had been placed by Jupiter under my own special care. My one hope was, that his capture would put to shame the selfishness of Venus, and set her thinking of something else except her unlucky lover.

Not a bit of it. I was late for dinner, and by the time I had dressed and entered the room the first two courses had already been served.

"What have you done with Q?" asked Venus, as I sat down to a plate of lukewarm soup, and sent it away again. "Got him locked up, like the rest of them?"

"My dear lady," I replied, disgusted at her flippancy, "these troubles are too sad for chaff and jesting. As a matter of fact, the poor boy *is* locked up for the night; but he has got a room to himself, and the people have promised me to treat him kindly."

"As a personal conductor, Praxy," returned the goddess, helping herself to sweetbread with

white sauce and truffles, "I look upon you in the light of a failure. You undertook to bring us all safely back to the Piraeus by to-morrow week. We can't possibly get there in time unless we start this very minute, and six out of the eight are unavoidably detained. You'll catch it hot, Praxy, when the Jew sends down to fetch us and we are none of us there. I wouldn't be you for something."

"I must take my chance, my lady," said I, inwardly amused, and yet wholly unable to manufacture even a "sickly" smile. Venus appeared to guess at the inward amusement, and resented it as a mark of disrespect to the awful divinity.

"I suppose you never saw the Jew swing a thunderbolt, did you, Praxy? Well, I have, and a queer sort of an astronomical plaything it is. For a month or so after the 30th of May, Praxy, I should attach a lightning-conductor to the crown of my hat if I were you, or keep well underground."

"I'll think of it, my lady. I'm sure you would be sorry to see me seriously injured."

"I should, indeed. But what are they going to do with Q? and why have they put him in prison?"

I told her the whole story, feeling little inclination to eat, though the goddess meanwhile consumed her food with no perceptible diminution of relish. When the recital was over she took up a tiny handkerchief and pretended to wipe a

maternal tear from each of her lustrous eyes. Mistrusting, however, her powers of self-control, she hurried away to her room as soon as the last strawberry upon her plate had been devoured, and left me alone with Neptune.

"I can't tell you what a comfort it is to have you here, old man," said I, wringing the ancient mariner's horny hand as we parted for the night. "You are the only one of the whole eight who has never given me any trouble."

CHAPTER XVI.

NEPTUNE EATS MUFFINS.

NEXT day, at the opening of the police court, I presented myself for admission, but there were several cases having priority of Cupid's to be tried, and he was not charged with his juvenile offence until quite late in the morning. The poor boy looked sadly different from his own bright self when the policeman led him forward, and he shrank like a frightened squirrel from the staring faces in the crowd; but his appearance was nevertheless so striking and attractive that a low murmur of sympathy and interest went round the room as he stood up for examination.

I gave in his assumed name as usual, and made an appeal on behalf of his youth and inexperience which was calculated, I thought, to soften the hardest judicial heart—laying special stress upon the fact that he was a Greek, and that the customs of his country were so entirely different from ours.

"Boys at Athens have no cricket, or rounders, or any other healthy games, as our boys have," said I. "If they are not playing fly-the-garter or

hop-scotch, they're walking two-and-two; and boys can't walk two-and-two without doing some mischief, either with their hands or their feet. So every boy carries a catapult, and fires right and left at everything he sees; and the police look on and enjoy the fun."

"Are there any front teeth to be seen in the streets of Athens?" asked the cold-blooded magistrate, unmoved by my masterly defence of my little friend; "and do the majority of the inhabitants of that classical city possess one eye, or two? Is the weapon in court, sergeant, with which these outrages were committed?"

"Yes, your worship," said the policeman, handing up the catapult and bag of shot.

The police magistrate dipped his hand into the bag, pulled out a shot, held it tight and harmless between the points of his thumb and forefinger, and then tried the strength of the elastic bands, drawing them repeatedly up and down in front of him, as if taking deliberate aim at Cupid. The boy quite understood that he was going to be fired at, and instinctively, to the intense amusement of the court, put up both his palms before his face for protection. Then suddenly, a happy thought appearing to strike him, he turned round to me with a broad grin of anticipated diversion, and dropped his hands.

"He may have a shot if he likes, Praxy; I'll

only shut my eyes. But of course he'll let me have one back again at *him*—that's only fair."

"What does he say?" asked the police magistrate.

"He thought you were going to fire at him, sir," answered I. "You see, sir, he is a mere child. I hope you will deal with him leniently."

There are some persons who can take a joke even on the bench, and there are others who can take one nowhere. The learned gentleman who was hearing the present case belonged to the latter class, and the burst of laughter which filled the room when Cupid put up his hands made him angry.

"These shot," he observed, "when propelled by an elastic band of sufficient strength, are capable, I should imagine, of killing a baby. Does it appear, sergeant, that any of her Majesty's subjects have been injured by the pranks of this objectionable youth?"

"Only the horses, your worship, and the dogs. The West End dogs have had a terrible bad time of it for the last few days, especially the thin-skinned ones. Terriers, and poodles shaved in patterns, have been noticed to stand quietly sniffing at some object in the street, and then dart off all of a sudden for no apparent reason, with their tail between their legs, and a squeak that was quite heart-rending. A favourite black-and-

tan belonging to the Bishop of London's butler was yesterday afternoon condemned as mad, and carted away to be destroyed, because he had been seen at least half a dozen times to rush howling like a fiend along one side of St. James's Square, with no visible excuse for running. I entertain no sort of doubt that this young gentleman was up a tree in the square, or behind a cab, a-peppering of him. And the coachmen all over Belgravia have lost all control over their horses. The beasts are utterly demoralised. A carriage drives up to a front-door, the noble lord or lady gets out and goes into the house to pay a visit, and the coachman leaves hold of the reins for a second or two to light a cigarette, when the near horse suddenly shivers and whisks his tail, and the off horse plunges and shakes his mane, and both of them tear away at a mad gallop, and no mortal man can tell the reason why. The best-broken animal in the world will behave like that, your worship, when a swan-shot touches him up in some tender spot just inside his ear, or penetrates underneath his tail. It's a wonder to me there haven't been some serious accidents, with this sort of thing going on all day long in the most fashionable streets of London."

"I shall make an example of him," said the magistrate severely.

"He's very young, sir," pleaded I as a last resource, saying with the very best intentions the

very worst thing possible. "He's a fine big boy to look at, but he isn't yet fourteen."

"Isn't he, indeed?" said the magistrate, with a smile for which I longed to have a shot at him myself, picking out the tenderest spot upon his body. "I am glad of that, because it gives me the power of ordering a chastisement which will, I trust, prove beneficial, and which so dangerous a young member of society richly deserves. He will go to prison for fourteen days, and receive twice during that period twelve strokes with the birch-rod, the first castigation on the eighth day, the second immediately before his discharge."

"That comes of telling lies!" said I to myself, grinding my teeth with vexation. "If I had only told the truth, and said he was three thousand and fourteen, they couldn't have whipped him."

I almost wished I might be struck dumb before I could translate this fearful sentence to Cupid; but the disagreeable duty had to be performed, and the poor boy was removed from the court in custody before he had time to realise the nature of the punishment he must needs undergo. At my most urgent petition, and in consideration of his foreign nationality, he was placed by himself in a separate cell, instead of being herded with a lot of juvenile offenders; but that was all I could do for him, and with a heavy heart I bade my little friend good-bye, and went off to pay my accustomed visits in the City.

It was the same wretched business over and over again, and there is nothing special to be said about it. As the day of the trial drew near my deities became naturally more and more nervous about their fate; but they all behaved extremely well, Hercules in particular displaying an example of dignified resignation which was altogether semi-divine.

On my way to our lodgings in the afternoon I decided upon saying nothing to Venus about Cupid's floggings. She must of necessity be told that he was gone to prison, but there was no object in letting her know that her bright and happy boy was doomed to suffer acute bodily pain. I am by no means sure, however, that it would have materially distressed her, in her present mood, to hear that the very worst thing possible had befallen the dearest of her Olympian relatives or friends.

Having settled this point, I spent the rest of my time in debating within myself a question which puzzled me exceedingly. Why did my highly respectable landlady take so quietly the scandalous behaviour of my friends? She had seen Mercury led off from the very house between two policemen, and she knew as well as I did what had become of the rest, and with what manner of offences they were charged. It was inconceivable that she should allow the personal conductor of so disreputable a gang to remain in her rooms, with

the two survivors of his party, for a single day. I had been expecting notice to quit ever since the morning of Mercury's arrest, and I felt by no means certain that the woman would not claim compensation for injury which I might possibly have done her by giving the house a bad name. And yet she had never shown the least disapproval of my deities' proceedings, or expressed the slightest wish that I should vacate the premises and look out for rooms elsewhere. There must surely be some reason for treatment so totally opposed to all the time-honoured traditions of lodging-house keepers and landladies; but what the reason was I could not for the life of me divine.

I reached home about five o'clock—nearly two hours earlier than usual—intending to ask for a cup of tea, before strolling out with a view to an appetite for dinner. I was curious to see what amount of damage my imprisoned boy-deity had really done to the lamp-glasses in the Park. They might be all mended by this time; but I never could take a walk for the mere sake of walking, and I have always found the most trivial object better than no object at all.

Letting myself in quietly with the latch-key, I ascended the stairs and entered the sitting-room on the first floor. A grateful odour of buttered toast and tea filled the air as I stepped across the landing, and I concluded that Venus was pre-

paring a cup of the fragrant beverage for herself and Neptune with her own fair hands. On opening the door, a glance at the central table was sufficient to inform me that such preparations were going forward upon a somewhat substantial scale; but a glance at the farthest open window, between the half-drawn muslin curtains of which two figures were standing, informed me also that, although Neptune was undoubtedly of the party, the lady who presided at the domestic feast bore no sort of resemblance to the goddess of love and beauty.

She was a comfortably proportioned lady, with an ample waist, a pair of short chubby arms, and a head of fluffy ringlets, secured in position by a pack of yellow combs. The ample waist was at the present moment spanned by Neptune's trident arm, while the fluffy ringlets reposed contentedly upon the god's right shoulder. An eloquent silence enchained the happy pair, whose gaze appeared to be fixed upon a group of stunted shrubs which adorned a tiny garden on the opposite side of the road.

"Well, Mr. Tomkins!" exclaimed my landlady, gliding gracefully from her companion's embrace and advancing towards the tea-table; "I think, sir, you might have given a body warning!"

"I think so too, madam," said I, seeing my way to a smart little bit of repartee, "and I give it now. The day after to-morrow, madam (to-

morrow being Sunday), my two friends and myself will vacate your lodgings. A scene such as that which I have just had the misfortune to interrupt, though picturesque up to a certain point, strikes me as verging on the improper."

"Ah, sir! that's a strange thing for you to say to *me,* who for the last fortnight have put up with scenes on the part of your fellow-lodgers which were not only improper but criminal. But I had an object, sir," continued the good lady, with a tender glance at the ruler of the waves —"I had an object, Mr. Tomkins, you may be sure."

"And the object I presume, stands there?" said I, pointing to the bearded god, and intending once again to display my talent for sarcasm.

"It does indeed, sir; and what more worthy object could a middle-aged female desire? Oh, Mr. Tomkins!" continued the comely dame, putting up the corner of her dainty apron to her eye —"Oh, Mr. Tomkins! don't think the worse of me if I confess to you that this gentleman has won my widowed heart, and stepped completely into the shoes of him who has gone, I trust, to a better world. His royal head, his noble bearing, his majestic figure, his firmly planted footstep, and the sweep of his magnificent beard—what lone woman could resist such fascinations as these? And there's a seafaring atmosphere about the gentleman, Mr. Tomkins, which fetched me from

the very first day I saw him. The late lamented Mr. Jones was purser in a P. and O. steamship, and I have always, for his sake, looked with interest on mariners. I'm sure I don't wonder at you calling him Neptune, though of course it's only in fun, for the two are as like as new-born twins."

"When you have done talking nonsense, Mrs. Jones," said I, throwing myself into a chair, "I'll ask you to give me a cup of tea, for I'm tired and worried."

"Poor thing! Indeed, sir, yes, and I know you've had enough to worry you with them ill-conditioned folks as is now receiving the due reward of their misdeeds. But *he* isn't like that, sir, is he, now? Oh, *say* he isn't! *He* don't go about stealing, and poaching, and murdering, and committing all the crimes in the ten commandments—now, do he, sir?"

"No," I replied; "he's right enough so far as that, and a more respectable old gentleman doesn't breathe. But he's not by any means a fit sort of person for you to marry. The idea is too monstrous to be entertained for a moment. Give it up, Mrs. Jones, like a sensible woman, and pour me out another cup of tea."

"But why isn't he a fit sort of person, sir? He's a widower, isn't he?"

"That's more than I know, Mrs. Jones. A good many people might have something to say

upon that subject if you could only get at them. Has he ever asked you to marry him?—if the question be not too personal."

"No, sir, he never has, for the simple reason that he doesn't know how to speak the words. Arrangements of a practical nature are not easily made when one party can't understand a syllable of the other party's language. But I think I may say, sir, that although both of us is as good as deaf and dumb, we know each other's minds as well as if we had talked and whispered every day for a fortnight. I wouldn't have told you this, sir, in an ordinary case; I'd have torn my tongue out sooner; but this is not an ordinary case at all, sir, and can't be dealt with according to common rules. I trust you see my meaning clearly, sir."

"Quite clearly, Mrs. Jones; and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to act as go-between, and to assist you by translating your own impassioned phrases into Greek, and your lover's into English, if it were possible for me to view the match with favour. But when I tell you solemnly that it is a union which can never by any possibility take place, I expect you to believe that I know what I am talking about, and to renounce so ridiculous a project once for all."

"Easier said than done, sir," replied my land-

lady, looking fondly at her seafaring swain. "I love him! I adore him! I worship him!"

"Does she say she'll have me, Praxy?" asked Neptune, who during the above-transcribed dialogue had occupied himself in the steady consumption of four large cups of tea, with corresponding rounds of buttered toast and muffins. Having now, however, reached the utmost limit which five-o'clock feeding can attain, unless it be the intention of the feeder to forego his dinner altogether, he appeared disposed to resume the equally agreeable pastime of love-making. "Speak up for me, Praxy!" he continued, rising from his chair. "She's the sweetest creature that ever breathed on earth. I love her! I adore her! I worship her! Tell her that, Praxy, and let me hear her say that she'll be mine!"

"I shall tell her nothing of the sort," said I. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, at your time of life, playing such pranks as these! It was only last night I was saying how little trouble you had given me, and now I find you're as bad as the worst of them! And, pray, how long has all this nonsense been going on?"

"Every evening for a fortnight or more, Praxy. Venus goes out driving in the Park from four to six, and then we have tea together, this adorable being and I. And cake, Praxy, and buttered toast, and muffins! I could die for that woman, Praxy; I could indeed!" So saying, he raised the

last surviving section of muffin to his lips, kissed the tip of it to the widow, and devoured it with lingering gratification.

"He likes my muffins, does he, the duck?" said Mrs. Jones, smirking at her lover. "Oh, Mr. Tomkins! if you'd only so much as tell me the Greek for a duck, I'd almost let you off a week's rent for the apartments!"

I reasoned with the two old fools until I was tired of talking, and the return of Venus from her drive broke up the party. I saw, however, that they were bent upon their folly; and in the course of the evening Mrs. Jones informed me that Neptune and herself were going off by an early train in the morning, to spend a long and happy day together at Richmond.

"But Jemima will get you all you want, Mr. Tomkins," said she, "just the same as if I was at home; and I know you prefer cold dinner on Sundays."

CHAPTER XVII.

VENUS GOES OUT DRIVING.

It was a matter of infinitesimal importance to me whether I ate a cold dinner on Sunday or no dinner at all; for on the Monday morning my poor, bluff, honest Hercules was to be put on trial for his life, and I could think of nothing but his almost certain fate and its tragic consequences. Surely, if anything on earth could "shake society to its foundations," it would be the execution of a demi-god by the public hangman.

I breakfasted *tête-à-tête* with Venus, who was the only one of my celestial team now left; and, under the circumstances, I could hardly do less than place my poor services at her disposal during the remainder of the day. I offered to bear her company to any suburban pleasure-resort she might choose to name, excepting Richmond, as I had no fancy to break in upon the philanderings of Neptune and my landlady. The Queen of Beauty "declined with thanks," giving me politely to understand that my room would be more acceptable than my company. I am slow in many ways, but moderately quick at taking

hints, and I took this particular hint with undisguised satisfaction. We agreed to eat our cold roast beef and gooseberry tart together at seven, but to see as little as possible of each other in the meanwhile.

As I parted with the lovely goddess and went my way, I could not help thinking how very much happier the world in general would be if such convenient family arrangements as these could be made with greater frequency.

Sunday in this particular case was neither a day of rest nor a day of amusement to the ill-starred personal conductor. I believe I went to St. Paul's in the morning, and to the Abbey in the afternoon; and I remember coming to the conclusion that no man knows what an organ and a surpliced choir can do for him until he is in some real trouble. I don't think I did anything else except wander about St. James's Park, hunting for the splintered fragments of dear little Cupid's lamp-glasses, and reciting the names and attributes of my imprisoned deities one by one.

About half-past six I let myself in at the front-door of Mrs. Jones's lodgings, and mounted the stairs as usual. Looking into the drawing-room on my way, out of languid curiosity to see whether Venus had returned from her accustomed drive, I found that she had not only returned, but returned in company. She had met Lord Alconbury in the Park, and had persuaded him,

with no great difficulty, to make a third at our somewhat frugal meal.

I accepted the inevitable, and made his lordship welcome; wishing him, as so many a welcomed guest is wished, at the bottom of the sea. The meeting, as he solemnly assured me, was purely accidental. He admitted that he had arranged a correspondence with Venus before leaving Paris for the Lakes, which little scheme, however, had fallen through, in consequence of some blunder on her part about the London address. To this extent my precaution in taking rooms, instead of remaining at a hotel, was amply justified. On the part of Lord Alconbury, the meeting between them was accidental enough; but I have not the slightest doubt that Venus drove out every day from four to six in the hope of finding him.

"Did you receive her letters, my lord?" I enquired.

"One every day, as regularly as the post came in; but she, never one of mine."

I could not help smiling as I thought how much the British Museum might be disposed to offer his lordship for a "Complete Collection of Autograph Letters from Venus to an English Nobleman." The smile broadened into a grin as I wondered whether the contents were such as the British public might profitably peruse if the epistles were translated into English and exposed in frames upon the walls. Lord Alconbury ob-

served the smile, and misunderstood it, as I might have known he would do.

"There is no other way," he resumed, "in which I can account for the miscarriage of my letters. I feel sure," he added, looking at me with perfect civility and good humour, but with the air of a man who means to have a plain and satisfactory answer—"I feel sure that it is not to be accounted for on the theory of any steps whatever, directly or indirectly taken by yourself."

"You do me no more than justice, my lord," said I, meeting his significant look at least halfway. "When I begin to intercept letters I shall begin to rob my employers' till." I saw that he implicitly believed me, and he did not refer to the subject again.

"By the by," said he, after a short pause, "talking of robbing tills, some of these people that you have been taking round appear to have been conducting themselves in a rather extraordinary way."

"Has Venus told you all about it?" I enquired, wondering to what excess the heartlessness of this woman might carry her.

"She has told me quite enough to make me understand that they are not desirable associates for such as her. Your landlady, too, must be a queer sort of female. Venus says she has run off with Neptune."

"They are coming back again, you know. They only went down to Richmond for the day."

"Venus declares they are going to be married, but that is no affair of mine. I may as well tell you plainly, however, that one day this week I mean to make Venus my wife, and I don't choose that she should remain any longer in a house where such things as these have been going on. I shall take her with me directly after dinner to Sedgeworth, and place her in charge of a thoroughly respectable old lady with whom I used often to lodge when I was down there fishing. I can run backwards and forwards to see her from Sutton Street; and, as soon as I have made proper arrangements, we can be married quietly in the village church—probably on Thursday morning. My people won't like it, nor will you; but I am so madly fond of the girl that I must and will do it, so I hope you will consent with a good grace to wash your hands of her, and raise no fruitless opposition."

"You have surely not forgotten, my lord, that the young lady was placed by her own people in my charge, and that I am responsible for her reproduction in safety when the trip is over?"

"She tells me a different story. She declares that she has no belongings whatever, and that she is absolutely free."

"Suppose, my lord," said I, with a desperate determination to hit my hardest and take the

consequences—"suppose she should turn out to be a married woman?"

"The thing is too absurd for contemplation; and, unless you are prepared with proofs of it, I can only regard your suggestion as an insult both to her and to myself."

I need hardly say that all this time we were speaking English.

"Heaven forbid, my lord, that I should insult either one of you. Nothing was farther from my intention. But are you not well aware that this boy whom we call Cupid is her son?"

"I am aware of nothing so outrageously impossible. The lad is fourteen years old, and she cannot be a day over twenty."

"Well, my lord, I have fired off my biggest guns, regardless of your anger, and yet striving hard to give no offence, anxious only to do my duty in your interest and in hers. If you won't believe me, Heaven help you! for you'll sorely need more help than I or any other man can give. I only ask permission to speak for five minutes to the young lady alone."

The young lady, however, flatly refused to grant the interview, though Lord Alconbury himself endeavoured to persuade her that it would be better to hear what I had to say.

"I know all about it, Praxy," said Venus. "I could write down every one of your wise and prudent exhortations for you. It would only be

breath thrown away, and we should be just exactly where we were before. Nothing that you or anybody else can say will change my resolution."

"Have you thought, madam, of the sorrow which has befallen your nearest friends and the companions of your journey—of the noble lady who must stand to-morrow in the dock, with the eyes of the whole court upon her—of your own boy, Cupid, at this moment caged in prison?"

"I know nothing whatever about them, Praxy. The movements of such people don't interest me in the faintest degree. They are altogether a bad lot, and I'm sorry that they ever joined our party."

"Is it possible," said I, "that any woman lives who can act like this—human, or divine, or demon? Is it possible——"

"Spare me your possibilities, Praxy. Put them down as unhappy certainties, and then throw up your hands and eyes with horror at the depravity of the sex, and be thankful that you belong to a better one. The sex knows what it's about, Praxy, and isn't likely to be frightened away from playing its little game by anything that *you* can say. You're a good fellow, Praxy, and mean well, but, like most of the mortals, you're just the least little atom stupid."

"What do you mean by 'most of the mortals'?" asked Lord Alconbury, his face lighting up in so remarkable a way that I almost hoped he had

received a miraculous hint from behind the veil. I tried to strengthen the suspicion by smiling at him significantly, and Venus helped me by blushing all over her cheeks and brow as maiden never blushed before.

"I was only carrying on the old joke about pretending to be Venus," stammered the goddess, in evident and painful confusion.

Lord Alconbury looked extremely puzzled, but the light would not break in upon his eyes. He sat buried in thought for half a minute, and then suddenly filled himself a glass of wine.

"It's too absurd!" he muttered angrily, as he got up from the table. "And, by Jove!" he added, looking at his watch, "if we're not off in two minutes we shall miss the last train."

If any man says that Lord Alconbury was a fool—a preternatural fool—an impossible fool—too big a fool even for the wildest pages of romance—that man doesn't know what it is to be confronted on his travels with the eyes, the lips, the voice, the figure, and the flowing hair of the Queen of Love and Beauty.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HERCULES IN THE DOCK.

I HAD declined to act as interpreter at the Old Bailey on the day of the great trial, as it would have been impossible for me to translate to my friends before a crowded court the sentences which must be passed upon them. A native Greek who spoke excellent English was therefore employed for that purpose, and I attended merely as a spectator. I was, however, accommodated with a reserved seat, by virtue of my connection with the prisoners.

I am not going to describe the trial. No dramatic incident could arise out of a case in which the evidence was so palpably clear. The one feature of interest which distinguished the arraignment of Hercules from ordinary cases of murder was the very remarkable personal appearance of the prisoner himself. He had, indeed, lost a stone at least during his incarceration, and he looked haggard and worn and miserable. But on his face was a quiet smile of conscious power, and a look of hope, and a majesty of dignified repose, which created sympathy, in spite of the enormity of his crime. As

you looked at his broad shoulders, and towering height, and huge square chest, and massive limbs, his strength appeared so prodigious, so ponderous, so irrepressible, that you felt as if, in spite of himself, it must needs crush and slay. It seemed no more to accuse such a man of killing than to accuse another man of treading on his neighbour's toes.

There were few witnesses to be called, and the first part of the trial took an incredibly short time. Towards eleven o'clock the judge summed up—very much, as everybody said, against the prisoner. The jury retired to consider their verdict, and remained in conference nearly half-an-hour. This delay was distinctly hopeful, and I felt my spirits rising.

At last they re-entered the court, and Hercules slowly turned his head and watched them with eager eyes. Colossal as it was, it looked such a tiny little head, set upon such a gigantic frame. There was no suspicion of paleness in his face, no quivering lip, no nervous twitchings of the mouth, but every feature perfectly under control. He seemed so capable of dealing universal death, and yet so calm in his determination to refrain, that you thanked him inwardly for not making an end of you then and there, and exalted self-restraint into the noblest of virtues.

"Are you agreed upon your verdict?" asked the clerk of assize in the accustomed form,

"We are."

"Do you find the prisoner guilty, or not guilty?"

"Guilty, with a strong recommendation to mercy."

"On what ground?" enquired the judge.

"On the ground of his enormous size."

"I cannot accept such a verdict as that," replied the judge. "What do you mean?"

"We think he's too big to hang, my lord," said the foreman; "and that's the truth."

"Wire cables wouldn't do it," remarked a juror who was in the rope and basket trade.

"No scaffold yet erected would stand the strain," observed a cabinetmaker and joiner.

"The drop would endanger the public safety," added a juryman whose business premises lay near the place of execution.

"The walls of Newgate would totter to their foundations," said a master builder.

"Those are questions for the sheriff and prison authorities to decide," said the judge, "if they are to be raised at all. They have nothing to do with the jury. I must trouble you to retire again, and bring me a proper verdict."

Five minutes afterwards they returned into court, with the announcement that they found the prisoner guilty, but recommended him to mercy, in consideration of his presumed ignorance of our laws. The usual question was asked—the inter-

preter explaining to Hercules that it was not intended to be answered—and the judge, amidst a silence that might be felt, assumed the black cap and addressed the prisoner at the bar.

"Hercules Immensitos," he began—for such was the name by which I called him—"you have been found guilty, after a patient trial, of the greatest offence which any man can commit against the laws of this or any other civilised country. For that offence your life is justly forfeited. I cannot admit that prodigious size is any excuse for the exercise of reckless violence. On the contrary, it appears to me that the almost superhuman strength with which you have been endowed imposed upon you a deeper obligation to keep your temper within control. In expiation of the cruel blow with which you sent a defenceless old man to his grave, you yourself must die. The recommendation to mercy which the jury have handed in shall be forwarded to the proper quarter, and will doubtless receive that amount of consideration which it deserves; but I should be deceiving you if I were to hold out even the most distant hope that your life will eventually be spared." His lordship then pronounced sentence of death in the prescribed form, and the words were translated, slowly and solemnly, into the prisoner's ears.

And this was the man who had torn lions to pieces with his fingers, and hoisted bulls upon his

back, and tossed men into the sea like cats, and turned the course of rivers, and strangled serpents in his very cradle, and led away Cerberus from his kennel as if he had been a puppy. This was the man whose feats of strength and deeds of valour had gained him admittance into the company of the gods, and placed him first in rank among the bravest of the heroes. This was the man to whom temples had been reared, and boars and rams and oxen offered up without number—no sacrifice too costly if only men might propitiate so powerful a deity, and avert the wrath of one who could annihilate at a blow. His godlike powers had indeed for a time passed from him, as Jupiter said they must, but the memories of his triumphs were with him still, and even now his strength was terrible. With one hand he could have throttled the judge upon the bench and flung him at the heads of the jury. In ten minutes, barring pistol-shots, he could have cleared the court, crushing to death policemen, witnesses, and counsel at every step and at every blow. And now, because in an utterly false position, not knowing what he did, he had transgressed a sacred law—transgressed it, however, with no evil intent, but with the waywardness of an unreasoning child—he must be led away covered with ignominy and disgust, the least divine even among the mortals, the lowest of the low, to a violent and a shameful death. As I thought of all this,

and knew, as none else in the court could know, who he was, and what must be passing through his mind, I could contain myself no longer. The tortures of the last three weeks had broken me down at last, and I burst into a torrent of unquenchable tears.

As the words of the dreadful sentence sank one by one into the prisoner's mind, and he realised at length the full import of their meaning, he stood up to his full height and proudly raised his head and clenched his hands, and his whole frame quivered with excitement. A look of indignation and anger settled upon his face, and it seemed as if at last he had reached the limit of his forbearance and must now assert his power. At the critical moment, however, when I dreaded some fatal outburst of passion—fatal to himself as well as to many others—by a happy chance he looked round, and I managed to catch his eye. We looked steadily at each other for a few seconds only, I with my hands clasped in front of me, imploring him to be still; but in those few seconds he had called to mind the promise he had given me, and he became suddenly as quiet as a child. It was this last touch of noble self-restraint, and the gentle smile with which he gave me back my gaze of mute entreaty, that broke me down. From that instant I lost my head, and forgot everything else in my sorrow for my poor condemned divinity.

"Cheer up, Praxy!" said Hercules. "May be it'll all come right again. If not, why, it can't be helped, and it's nobody's fault but my own. I've killed a thousand men before now, Praxy, and thought nothing of it; but I'm really sorry I brained that there gardener. Tell the old bloke in a wig as 'ow I said so; I should wish him to know."

"What does the prisoner say?" asked the judge.

"He says he is very sorry for what he has done, my lord." And then they led the poor fellow away.

The interpreter, however, hurried up to me, asking eagerly for explanations. "What did he mean by saying he had killed a thousand men?" asked he. "Could not something be done to establish a case of insanity? He must be as mad as a hatter, you know!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BRIDE OF THE SEA.

DIANA stalked into the court like an insulted queen. Her offence, though the unhappy cause of another so serious, was not in itself of the highest magnitude; and the counsel for the defence made such fun of her midnight frolic, that he sent everybody into fits of laughter. The pet

stag had been badly wounded in the knee with a blunt arrow, and would run lame for life; but the deer were only frightened, and the damage done to the fences was inconsiderable. She was sentenced to a month's imprisonment for the tres-pass, and Mercury to three months for the double offence of trespass and horse-stealing.

"And do you know whom you are talking to, and whom you are sentencing, and who it is that you have had the impudence to lock up for the last two weeks in prison, you base, ignoble, pigmy mortals? Do you know that I am the daughter of Jupiter, and the twin sister of Apollo—that I killed Orion with one of my unerring darts, and changed Actaeon into a stag, so that my dogs might tear him in fifty pieces? Do you know that I am the Queen of the Night—that I make the moon to shine—that all the forests are mine, and all the deer, and the rabbits, and the hares, and the foxes, and the polecats, and the squirrels—and that I hunt them when and where I please?"

The Queen of the Night looked every inch a goddess, as with flashing eye, and scornful voice, and imperious gesture she delivered this indignant protest against the insult offered to her divinity. It was all translated to the judge, who simply directed that the prisoner should be forthwith re-moved in custody, and examined by competent medical officers as to the condition of her mind.

"Why don't you speak up for me, Praxy?"

asked the goddess. "You know well enough who I am."

"Take her away," said the judge angrily, before I had time to reply; and Mercury, who attempted a similar recital of his own godlike antecedents, was ejected in like manner.

After lunching at a chop-house in the City I drove down to Wandsworth, and asked permission to see Cupid—anxious, in no small degree, about the condition in which I should find him. Two days' imprisonment had sadly paled his cheeks; but the rosy flush came back again at the sight of his old friend, and he rushed at me with his own boisterous impetuosity. They had found out that he knew how to net, and as I entered the cell he was working away merrily with his mesh and cords, and whistling like an Olympian blackcap.

"Praxy!" cried the boy, flinging away his mesh, and dropping more stitches than half-an-hour's labour would pick up again; "so you've come at last to take me out! Oh, do let us get away into the open air directly."

"My dear child, I have no power to take you out. It was as much as I could do to get leave to come and see you."

"But you're never going to let them whip me!" he cried again, as soon as he had got over his first disappointment of release. "Just think of it,

Praxy! twelve cuts on your poor little Cupid's naked body, twice over!"

"And how many thousand cuts with the bow-string have you given your little imps up aloft, I should like to know?"

"That's quite a different thing," said Cupid, with the logic usually employed in such a case, and in a tone which implied that I must be a positive fool for drawing a comparison so absurd. "Besides, I don't hit very hard. I only touch the little beggars up with a flip or two now and then, when they're cheeky. But if you'll only get me off this flogging, Praxy, I'll promise never to whack any one of them again."

"It won't be till Saturday," said I, "and that's a long while off. A good many things may happen before that time." There was not the faintest chance of anything happening to interfere with the poor child's punishment, but I was bound to say something or other by way of comfort. "And you are not dull, Cupid, all alone in here?"

"Not a bit. I love netting, and the matron's most tremendously kind. Of course I'd sooner be out shooting at the dogs and horses in the Park; but I shouldn't mind staying in prison a month if they'd only let me off the switching. What's Elliman's Embrocation like, Praxy? If the matron rubbed me over with it, do you think the birch would sting? Vulcan could make me in-

vulnerable in a minute, with some of his patent grease, if he were here."

"Perhaps you'll get off, after all," said I; "and if you don't—well, I've been switched myself, Q, a dozen times, and it is not so very dreadful." I don't remember thinking this while the operation was going on; but what is one to say?

Then I paid a visit of condolence to the incarcerated god of wine, and found him sadly crest-fallen, and seriously in want, as it seemed to me, of a good glass of generous liquor. "What do they mean, Praxy," he indignantly began, "by treating me like this? Do they know who I am? By Jove! when I get back to Olympus I'll blast and wither all their vineyards till there shan't be a drop of wine left upon the earth. The villains!"

"That won't immediately affect this country," I replied. "You must blast and wither the hop-grounds. What do they give you to drink?"

"Two half-pints a day of some nasty muddy yellow stuff that they call beer—by the doctor's orders, if you please, because he said I wanted a slight stimulant. Very slight indeed, if I am any judge of my own internal feelings. Otherwise I should have had nothing but cold water. He can speak a few words of Greek, the doctor can; and he told me about it the last time he came. The Jew warned us that we must take our chance of getting into rows, but I never bargained for any-

thing like this." Then he requested information about the trial; and I had barely time to tell my story when the warder jingled his heavy keys, and brought the interview to an end.

On my return home I found a letter lying on the sitting-room table—just that instant come in, as the servant-maid informed me, by the district post. The envelope thereof was highly scented, and adorned with a gilded border. In the left-hand corner two naked infants were flying into a bird's nest and stealing eggs; and on the adhesive seal was stamped a red heart in relief, transfixed with a golden arrow. Unwilling to damage these works of art by tearing, I cut the missive open with a paper-knife, and was fairly knocked back-ward into an arm-chair by the odour of patchouli which pervaded the note-paper inside.

"Sir," ran the letter—"this is to inform you that we were married this morning by special license, and are about to start for our honeymoon. It was very expensive, but I don't grudge the money, now that my noble captain is all my own. Oh, Mr. Tomkins, he is such a duck! We shall be absent only a week, and Jemima can manage nicely for you, now that your party is so small. My duty, and my husband's kind regards.—Yours respectfully, Mary Anne Neptune (Bride of the Sea)."

This was one of the minor troubles, and it did not materially add to my distress at the general

desertion of my friends. I was sorry for the woman, but I had done my best to warn her, and my conscience was clear.

Yes—my party was small indeed! Every one of them had left me now. Jemima sent in my dinner, and the maid-servant cleared the things away, and I sat in my solitude, disconsolate and bereaved. A personal conductor with nobody to conduct is an object, methinks, over which even a glass eye might shed a tear.

There was nothing to read except a *Graphic* and a couple of magazines, and I had not the heart to seek dissipation of my loneliness at some music-hall or theatre. The thought of a music-hall set me shuddering, as it will for many a long day; but reminded me also that I must write a letter to the Superintendent at Hanwell, with reference to a box of clothes and other requisites which I was sending to my poor friend Apollo. I need hardly say that the garments purloined by Mercury at Athens had been long ago replaced by suits more honestly acquired, and less likely to attract attention on our return. To the best of my belief the stolen finery rested where it had been placed, in bundles tightly fastened and weighted with heavy pebbles, among the ruins of various submerged temples off the shore at Pozzuoli.

I opened my writing-case, and set to work upon my letter. The gas-burner stood immediately over my head, and in order to avoid a total

eclipse of light upon the paper beneath, I was obliged to shift my materials to the right, and lean well over the table. The position was uncomfortably awkward, and by the time I had got as far as "15 Burnham Place, Warwick Road," I became aware of a painful sensation between my chest and an ill-conditioned waistcoat button, which rendered further progress in such a posture out of the question. Opening my shirt-front, I saw that the inconvenience was due to the sharp edge of Ganymede's locket, which I invariably wore round my neck, but had just now totally forgotten. I took it off, in order that I might write with greater ease, and tossed it down upon the paper, where it fell so close to the top of the page as to smudge the wet ink of the recently written address.

"Clumsy!" said I to myself, taking up the stone again and breathing on it, and then hurriedly wiping away the ink before it had time to create a permanent stain. "Ah, my boy, my boy!" I cried aloud in Greek, thinking of the fun we had had together; "if you could only fly down upon the eagle's back and help me to set my deities free!" But I knew that I might as well call upon the rocks to cover me, or invoke the timely aid of one of Jupiter's moons. The sight and fingering of the stone, however, brought back so vividly the recollection of my marvellous adventures, that I sat dreamily holding it in my hand, and it was

fully half-an-hour before I resumed the writing of my letter.

CHAPTER XX.

A CELESTIAL VISITOR.

On the following day I conducted myself into the country, from sheer force of habit, there being nobody else at hand. I could not get an order to see any of my imprisoned deities until Thursday, and I had no other interest in remaining in town. A run by train to Reigate, and a walk from thence along the Box Hill ridge to Dorking, in lovely weather, did me a world of good; and I returned to my dinner with the most plausible apology for an appetite which I had brought to the table for fifteen or sixteen days. During the railway journey home the sky became rapidly overcast, and I saw that we were in for a dark, misty evening.

We men are a greedy lot, and I myself plead guilty to being among the greediest of all. If any man ever bore a heavy burden upon his back, I was thus encumbered at the present moment; and yet under the influence of a good dinner the packages seemed to roll out of the wallet one by one. Jemima sent me in such an excellent plate of nice hot soup, and such a cut of salmon, and such a leg of lamb, and such a bundle of asparagus, and such a raspberry-and-currant tart,

that when the feast was over, and I sat in my easy-chair, with a bottle of good claret on a little table beside me, I really began to look on the bright side of as dismal a picture as ever was painted by the Spanish school, and to hope that some impossible combination of events might yet arise, under cover of which my captive divinities should be freed.

As I sat pondering thus, alternately despondent and sanguine, the bottle of claret became gradually empty, and the clock of a neighbouring church struck ten. I was on the point of going out to take a turn in the damp air before retiring to rest, when I heard wheels as of a hansom stop short at the front door, followed by an impatient thumping of the knocker and a needlessly violent ringing of the bell. Fifteen seconds afterwards a boy in knickerbockers burst into the room, pushing himself in front of the maid-servant who had opened the door for him, and cried out, in a voice which I seemed to know—

"O Praxy, will you please come down and pay the cabman, for I haven't got a farthing?"

"Why, Ganny!" exclaimed I, frightened out of my wits, and yet equally overjoyed; "how in the name of wonder did you come here?" But for the good dinner and the bottle of claret, I really believe I should have fainted like a woman.

"Tell you all about it presently," was the reply; "but the man wants his money."

"How far has he driven you?" I enquired, the practical-mindedness of the boy recalling me to myself.

"Haven't the least idea; but it's of the greatest possible importance that you should find out, so please be sure and make him tell you. Are you listening to what I say?" continued he, observing that I still looked dazed.

"All right," I answered, taking a few silver pieces out of my purse; "I quite understand." And I ran down to the front door.

The man demanded half-a-crown, which was probably too much, and gave me an excuse for requiring minute details of place and distance.

"It's over four miles, sir, I do assure you, as you may see by looking at the book. You know Barton Court Road, sir, I suppose?"

"Yes; but which end of it? The road is half a mile long."

"Why, the farther end, sir, where there's a boys' school and a large playing-field. The young gentleman came out by the field-gate, and that's where he hailed me."

I paid the half-crown and remounted the stairs. "Now," said I to my young visitor, "before we begin to talk about anything else, you must have some food. Aren't you pretty nearly dead with hunger?"

"Well, Praxy, I could eat a cold fowl or two if there were any such things lying about the

table. But where are all the others? Are they gone to bed already?"

"Shan't tell you anything at all about them until you have had your supper." So I rang the bell for the maid, who briskly served the boy with the best that Jemima had to offer; and Ganymede pounded away for five and thirty minutes at various miscellaneous dishes, until he declared that he could do no more. Then we got rid of the empty plates and glasses, and I began my story.

"Gone to bed?" I repeated, in answer to his last question—"well, I don't rightly know. Judging from the early hours kept at the establishments where most of them are staying, I think it highly probable; but what I do know is this—that Apollo is in a madhouse, and Diana in prison for a month, aud Mercury for three times as long, and Bacchus and Cupid for a fortnight each; that Hercules is in the condemned cell at Newgate, where he will remain until he is taken away to be hanged for murder; that Venus is going to be married the day after to-morrow to some young fool of an English nobleman; and that Neptune has already united himself in not very holy wedlock to the landlady of these lodgings, and has gone off with her on their wedding-tour. Perhaps that amount of news may be about as much as your small mind can take in for the present; and now I want to know how you con-

trived to find me out, and what brought you here?"

"Why, Praxy, it's positively frightful!" said the boy, wholly unable to realise the tragic horror of the tale. "But what have they all been doing? And why ever didn't you rub the stone before?"

"Rub the stone?" repeated I, clutching at it instinctively with my left hand, and remembering the occurrence of last evening towards this very hour. "And pray am I indebted for the honour of this celestial visit to the accident of my having rubbed this stone?"

"To be sure you are. My mother always said that those stones possessed great virtue, and I see now that they must be very virtuous indeed. I had just filled a cup of wine for Jupiter, and was handing it to him, when I felt all of a sudden a sharp burning pain in my chest, and before he could take hold of the handle I let the goblet fall. It was the first time I ever did such a thing in my life, and he was so furious that I thought he would make an end of me. But I tore open my shirt and showed him where I felt the pain, and he forgave me. Then I took out the stone, and noticed that it was scratched all over with letters on both sides. The letters were as red as fire, and Jupiter told me to copy them down at once while they shone out brightly. On one side was written "15 Burnham Place," and on the other "Warwick Road." Neither Jupiter nor I

could pronounce the words, so we showed them to Minerva, who knew no more what they meant than we did. However, she kindly said she would make a note of it, and went away to consult the ghosts of the seven wise men. Meanwhile I wrote them down; and the moment I had finished, the fires went out, and the stone looked just as usual. Then I told Jupiter that I had given the other half of the stone to you, and he said that it must be a message."

"'You had better go down on the eagle,' said he, 'and see what's the matter; only be sure and take that bit of paper with you, or you won't be able to find the way.' So I started off next morning directly after breakfast, and here I am."

"It's the luckiest thing in the world!" said I, rushing about the room, half-wild with joy. "You must go back and tell Jupiter what a plight these gods and goddesses are in, and persuade him to interfere. I suppose he can whisk them all back to Olympus again if he chooses, can't he, just as he whisked them down to the Piraeus? He has only got to raise his awful hand, and issue a decree, and there isn't a prison on this earth that could hold any one of them."

"I don't exactly know what he does in such a case," replied the boy; "I rather think he sneezes. But of course he can manage it somehow. Shall I go now directly?"

"No; wait here and rest for an hour or two,

and get away before daylight to-morrow morning. Where have you left the eagle?"

"In a tent at the corner of a field, with a lot of bats and balls lying about on the turf, and some shoes with spikes in the soles. I kept on kicking my feet against them as I felt my way along. It was pitch dark when we dropped into the field; but I could just make out the white canvas of the tent, so I led the eagle up to it and drew aside the awning and fixed him in. I had brought his supper with me; and I heard some drops of water trickling into a tank close by against the wall of the house, so I filled a watering-pot that I had the luck to stumble over, and gave the old bird something to drink. Just then I heard a sudden stamping of feet and clatter of voices, as if about a hundred boys were going upstairs to bed; and a minute afterwards the top story of the house was lighted up, and half-a-dozen boys threw open their windows and looked out into the field, chattering across to one another from room to room. I stayed in the tent feeding the eagle until the windows were shut and the house seemed quiet, and then I followed the wall till I came to a high double gate, fastened by a wooden peg on the inside. I let myself out and pulled the gate to; but, as the peg is hanging down loose, I can easily get in again by lifting the latch. For a few minutes I stood looking up and down the road, and wondering which way to

turn, when a horse and a great black hood came slowly round the corner of a street only a few yards off, with a fellow perched up behind them. I ran up to him and showed him my paper, which he read by the light of his lamp, and then told me to jump into the hood. I supposed it must be a cab, but I never saw one like that before. It was a jolly sort of a machine to ride in, and we bowled along like mad; but you see I didn't know the name of the road where I got in, and that's the reason why I wanted you to ask the driver."

"I know exactly where it is," said I, "and I could take you there directly. The house is a large private school, and the boys are not likely to look into their cricket tent until after breakfast in the morning. But you must be back again in the field by three o'clock at the very latest, or there may be light enough for somebody to see the eagle. There was no dog anywhere about, was there?"

"Not that I could see or hear. There were any amount of cats, and one of them was white; so I shied a big leather ball at it, and smashed a window."

"That was a wild thing to do, considering that you were hiding."

"It was, rather; but you see I don't often get a chance. There are no cats on Mount Olympus. Minerva had them all poisoned with prussic acid,

because they tore the feathers off one of her sacred owls. But look here, Praxy: what am I to tell the Jew? I shall never be able to carry in my head the pranks these gods and goddesses have been playing, and the names of the prisons where the mortals have locked them up. Hadn't you better write it all down for me, just as you said it off a little while ago, so that the Jew may know exactly what to do, and where to lay his awful hand upon them?"

"That's a first-rate idea," said I, getting up from my chair to carry out his suggestion. "You're a clever boy, Ganny."

"So would you be a clever boy, if you had had to fill a quart pot to the brim fifteen times a day for three thousand years, and hand it to a gouty monarch on a slippery marble throne, without spilling a drop upon the floor. It was nervous work, I can tell you, for the first few weeks; but I'm getting accustomed to it now."

"I hope the old gentleman continues to enjoy good health?" I civilly observed, as soon as I had written out a list of my deities' misdemeanours, and an indication of the premises on which they might probably be found.

"He was well enough until you sent him up those bottles," replied Ganymede, "barring a twinge or two of gout; but he hasn't been himself since he took to mixing that white powder. He swears that if ever you come to dine with him

again, he'll make you drink a whole bottle at one go, till you're inflated like a balloon."

"I ought to have written directions on the labels," said I, "but it won't do him any harm. A deity who drinks so freely and dines so well can be none the worse for a little medicine. I trust, however, that you'll find him in a good humour when you get back again, because there is no time to lose. If Cupid is not set free by ten o'clock on Saturday morning, he'll get twelve cuts with a nice, long, wiry birch, and I believe those gaolers hit precious hard."

"What for?" asked Ganymede.

"For peppering dogs and carriage-horses with a catapult, and breaking half the lamp-glasses in the Park."

"How I wish I'd been there to help him!" exclaimed the boy, clapping his hands with glee. "Do tell me all about it!" And so, cherishing a good hope that all would now go well, I recounted to my young visitor the various exploits of his playfellow, with a lighter heart than I had carried within me since the first week of our stay in London.

At twelve o'clock I made Ganymede get into Cupid's bed, and sleep for an hour or two before starting on his return journey. I then threw myself on the sofa, with an alarum close against my head, not daring to undress for fear I should not wake in time. At a quarter past two I woke

the boy, and we let ourselves quietly out of the house, walking briskly along the streets until we met a cab, which soon set us down in Barton Court Road.

It was a dull, cloudy morning, and we entered the playing-field unperceived. As we shut the gate behind us, I heard the low chuckling in the eagle's throat which I had noticed on the first memorable evening at the Piraeus, and I knew that the bird had become aware of his young master's approach, and was happy. Five minutes later I had said my last farewell to Ganymede, and stood listening to the quick stroke of wings as the two mounted together into the dark eternity of space above.

CHAPTER XXI.

A COUNTRY WEDDING.

I WALKED back to my rooms in Burnham Place through the pale grey dawn, and slept soundly till eleven o'clock, undisturbed by starts of terror and tossings to and fro. After an early luncheon I took the train to Pangbourne, and spent three or four delightful hours in a rowing-boat upon the Thames. Towards eight o'clock Jemima provided for my material wants with unabated assiduity, and the evening was devoted to the same placid

self-indulgence which had characterised the earlier hours of its forerunner.

"If I only knew what time those two imbeciles were going to consummate their imbecility," said I to myself as I was dressing on Thursday morning, "I really think I would run down to Sedgeworth and see the fun. The chances are it will be early, to avoid a crowd. I'll risk the 9.20 train, and prowl about until the interesting ceremony is over, and pay my visits to the rest of the divinities in the afternoon."

Sedgeworth is a quiet suburban village, much frequented by holiday makers on a Sunday afternoon in summer, but dull rather than otherwise during the remainder of the year. Periodically a flutter of excitement is caused by the arrival of some solitary fisherman, who sets all tongues a-wagging upon the question whether he will make up to Miss Finch, Miss Baker, or Miss Green. Among a rural population such as this news gets about, though no one spreads it; and the whispered announcement that a grand English lord was going to marry a lovely foreigner of distinction, by special license from His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, drew quite a concourse of swains and spinsters to the pretty little Parish Church, shortly after ten o'clock on Thursday the 28th of May. A special license is not so easily obtained as it used to be; and how my love-stricken landlady managed to get hers is best

known to herself and the learned gentleman who took the fees.

The ceremony itself was intended to be of the simplest character possible, the bridegroom even entertaining the hope that there would be no one present except the clergyman, the clerk, the necessary witnesses, and the happy pair. He was not a little disgusted, therefore, to find, on entering the sacred building, that every bench was occupied by a row of well-dressed parishioners, while a crowd of gaping rustics choked up the aisles and doorways.

No bride that ever stood at an altar-rail looked so magnificent as Venus—fresh as if she had just emerged from the waves of her native sea, rosy with the bloom of all summer flowers, sparkling with the light of a thousand loves, and towering over the heads of the tallest maidens near her, less by superiority in height than by dignity of carriage. A low murmur of uncontrollable adulation rose up from the densely packed surface of human heads, as she trod like a veritable goddess between the long lines of spectators, and took up her place beside the handsome young lord. She was dressed entirely in white, with no ornaments except a plain gold bracelet, which had been presented to her at Milan; a coral necklace, the gift of the enthusiastic manager at Naples; and a rich diadem of costly pearls, which, as I had never seen it before, I supposed to be a tribute of

affection from her noble lover. Other trinkets indeed she possessed, had she been minded to wear them; for almost every night during our exhibition some devoted admirer had cast at her feet a bracelet, or ring, or other jewelled toy. But on this her bridal day she had chosen to appear in the guise of beauty unadorned, and she could not have chosen better.

The marriage service ran its accustomed course, nearly up to the point where the tying of the indissoluble knot may be said to begin. At this moment a rough and common-looking man, with smutty face and stout, brawny arms, appeared suddenly at a side door of the chancel, and elbowed his way through the crowd, until he reached the clear space at the altar rails, where stood the bride and bridegroom, with the officiating clergyman between them. He carried a large hammer in his right hand, and in his left a dainty little pair of delicately fashioned handcuffs, apparently quite new. He walked very lame, and resembled nothing so much as a blacksmith who had just left his forge.

"Now, missus," said the man in Greek, speaking with a strangely quiet but decisive voice, "just you come along with me;" and in an instant he had seized the bride by the arm, clapped the handcuffs round her wrists, and tapped the bolt which secured them with his hammer. Venus turned deadly pale, but offered no resistance, and

raised no cry. The clergyman fell back aghast, as if he had seen an apparition from the grave; while Lord Alconbury stood erect, twitching his hands convulsively, and making visible and painful efforts to step forward, but palpably unable either to speak or to move a limb. The intruder went hobbling along, with his hammer in one hand, and the right arm of Venus tightly grasped in the other, the crowd falling away at his approach with openly professed awe; till on reaching the bottom of the nave, he passed into the porch which led out of the north aisle, and closed the door behind him. Near this spot I had selected my own seat, not caring to be observed by either Lord Alconbury or his bride; and as Venus and her conductor turned the corner to gain their exit, the dress of the lovely goddess swept my own garments with so close a touch that I instinctively muttered a commonplace apology for standing in the way. She recognised my voice, and raised her eyes to mine. It was clear that she connected me in some way or other with the frustration of her scheme; and as long as I live I shall never forget the look of hatred, disgust, and threatened vengeance with which she was pleased to favour me.

The instant that the door was shut, Lord Alconbury appeared to recover his normal sprightliness and his presence of mind; and, after an exchange of hurried whispers with the clergyman,

he started off in pursuit of the fugitives with rapid strides. An obsequious rustic held open the door as he gained the bottom of the nave; and no sooner had his lordship passed out than the entire crowd of spectators endeavoured to pass out after him. The crush at the doorway was indeed so great as to become dangerous; and the clergyman, hurrying down towards the spot, entreated his flock to respect the sanctity of the building, and to file out in decent order. Foreseeing what must of necessity happen, I had already taken the precaution to walk up the nave, and to slip out quietly at the side door, by which the limping man had entered.

"Did anybody see which way they went?" cried the widowed bridegroom, addressing those of the congregation who had made their way into the churchyard. His lordship, however, had been the first except myself to quit the building, and the question was futile.

"They must have gone through the lych-gate, your honour," said a rustic, "unless they climbed the wall. Better ask at the village school just opposite the gate, or at the public-house, a little way beyond."

But neither at the village school, nor at the public-house, nor at any private house, could the faintest trace of the mysterious couple be descried. A lame man with a hammer, leading a handcuffed lady all in white, forms a group suf-

ficiently conspicuous to attract attention even in the twilight; and the group in question, if it passed at all, must have passed through a populous village street at mid-day. Since the moment when the inner door of the church porch closed upon the goddess and her gaoler, no mortal eye had ever seen them; and no mortal eye will see them ever again.

I watched the crowd emerging from the doorway, and the anger of the ladies whose finery had been torn and battered in the crush, and the disappointed fury of the noble lord whose lady had been snatched rudely from his grasp at the very instant when she was to be made his own. I heard men saying how strange it was that nobody seemed to have the power to move, though all were indignant at an interruption so unseemly. I heard women upbraiding the clergyman because he collapsed with fright, and the bridegroom because he never raised a finger in defence of his own assaulted bride, and the churchwardens because they did not seize the committer of the outrage, and the rustics at the doorway, because they suffered him to pass through. I heard them marvel, as if it were the strangest feature of the scene, at the apathetic, not to say paralysed, demeanour of the lady herself, who neither screamed, nor scratched, nor fainted, but permitted herself to be led away tamely like a lamb. But how much more they marvelled, and

how they quarrelled over their marvelling, and by what theories they sought to account for the strange apparition, and the yet stranger vanishing into space, which they had witnessed at that bridal scene, I cannot tell. For myself, I had seen and heard enough; I was more than satisfied; I should see and hear no more if I watched the bewildered congregation until the last of them had gone home to dinner. The decree had evidently gone forth which should save the first of my eight divine offenders from the committal of a folly and a crime. I had yet to ascertain whether it had power to liberate from the consequence of their indiscretions those others who were far less guilty than she.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN SPITE OF BOLTS AND BARS.

On my way back to London I formed the happy project of saving time by paying my important visits in topographical order. Cupid and Bacchus were both undergoing their fourteen days at Wandsworth, and with that penal establishment I would begin.

I presented my order, and was ushered at once into the somewhat cramped apartment occupied by my little friend. He was busy as usual with his nets, and was driving dull care away

with whistlings which might have driven away the devil.

"Well, Q!" said I; "you don't look much like an incarcerated deity. You're as merry this morning as if you were flying about Olympus."

"And you don't look much like a personal conductor that has brought eight gods and goddesses to grief, and is going to be split in half with a thunderbolt, for not taking better care of them. Something queer has happened since you were here last, I'm certain. Tell us all about it, Praxy."

I described, in the fewest possible words, the scene of the wedding at Sedgeworth, and Cupid laughed till the warder thought he would go into a fit. "That's the way with Mummy," said he, with more truth than filial piety. "She tried on just the same sort of game with Mars, and I don't know how many more people; but she always gets caught and collared. Oh, what a glorious lark! I do so wish I'd been there!"

"You unnatural little brat!" said I, "to laugh at your Mamma's discomfiture."

"And how did old Dot-and-go-one find it out?" asked Cupid.

"Ah, how indeed? but he found it out somehow. And who knows but somebody else may have found out by this time that a naughty little god has been locked up, and is going to be

whipped for taking pot shots at the horses' tails with his catty?"

"There goes twelve o'clock, sir," said the warder, turning the key of the door. "Your half-hour's fully up, and the young gentleman must come with me and take his airing."

"Wait a second," cried Cupid, who thoroughly understood the signal; "ask him to let me open the window—it's always opened while I'm out in the court from twelve to one; and if you'll hoist me on to the ledge, Praxy, I can reach the cord and do it myself."

The warder laughed to see the boy coolly jumping on my back, and wriggling himself upwards until he sat upon my shoulders, whence he sprang upon the ledge and began unfastening the cord. With a farewell spank upon each of his brown legs, I left him standing at least ten feet below the little trap-door window, and turned to leave the cell. A good many funny things had taken place since the first time when he sat upon my shoulders, just fourteen weeks ago.

"That's a nice lad, sir," said the warder, as he held the door again for me to pass. "Pity he should ever have been sent to such a place as this; but it won't be for long."

"No," answered I, "it won't; and meanwhile it's a comfort to me to know that he is with people who treat him kindly. This is my staircase, isn't

it? Well—a thousand thanks, and good-morning to you!"

I had not taken half a dozen steps when the warder called me back, in a voice that spoke of lungs and consternation.

"The prisoner's gone, sir!" he cried, looking wildly up and down the cell. "I'm sure you'll bear me witness that he never passed the doorway. He must have escaped by the window while our backs were turned—and yet," he added, pointing to the ten feet of whitewashed wall without a scratch upon it, "even that's impossible. There isn't a cat in the prison as could do it. This is the most extraordinary thing I ever saw or heard of; and what ever *shall* I do?"

"Well," said I, with an honest but entirely unsuccessful effort to conceal my joy, "in your case I should lock the door, and communicate as quickly as possible with the sentinels outside the window. I presume the whole circuit of the prison is guarded."

"You're right, sir; and I ought to have thought of it before, but I was that dazed I could think of nothing."

The sentinels declared that not a living creature had been seen upon the walls. The alarm was spread in every quarter that a prisoner had fled; and in two minutes I found myself in the deputy governor's room, corroborating the warder's

statement with regard to the incomprehensible disappearance of his young charge.

I was just signing a deposition which a clerk had written down, when another warder came hastily into the room, and reported that No. So-and-so, the young Greek who was serving his fourteen days for drunkenness, had contrived by some means or other to scale the wall of the yard into which he and a gang of other prisoners had been turned loose for exercise. "The wall is twenty-seven feet high, sir," said the man, "and has three rows of bricks without mortar at the top, not one of which has fallen; and no one saw him climb it, and the sentinels are quite positive that nobody dropped down on the outer side."

"You have brought your friends good luck this morning, Mr. Tomkins," observed the deputy governor, putting on his eyeglasses, and taking up my card. "Such an unusually remarkable concurrence of events might almost justify my asking whether you could suggest any explanation of these marvellous flights, were it not sufficiently obvious that you had no more hand in them than I had. Do me the favour to add your London address to the deposition; and I need hardly say that we shall expect you to afford every assistance to the police, in case the fugitives should betake themselves to your protection."

"Certainly, sir, you may depend upon my doing so," I replied, rather surprised at getting

off so easily. The coincidence was undoubtedly suggestive of suspicion; and yet how could any reasonable man suppose that a harmless personal conductor had any means of spiriting a couple of prisoners over the walls and through the windows of a strongly guarded metropolitan gaol?

From Wandsworth I took a cab to Newgate, where Diana and Mercury had for the present been accommodated with rooms, though it was intended that they should be removed almost immediately into more commodious quarters. By way of fortifying myself against the probable shock occasioned by my first visit to a condemned cell, I took the precaution to eat a substantial luncheon on the way. On reaching the prison, and enquiring for my friends, I was ushered at once into the presence of the deputy governor.

"You called to see the three Greek prisoners, I understand, Mr. Tomkins," said that high official, politely waving his hand towards an unoccupied chair.

"Yes, sir; I should esteem it a favour to be allowed to speak with each of them for a few minutes. I am the only person in London whom they know."

"Quite so. You are probably unaware, Mr. Tomkins, that all three of them contrived to escape from the prison between twelve and one o'clock this afternoon?"

I envy the people in the novels who can always

command their features. I have no control over mine whatever. My expressive face beamed instantly with a glad smile of thankfulness, and my delight could not have been more transparent if I had waved my hat in the air and given three hearty cheers.

"Well, Mr. Tomkins?" said the deputy governor, with a look which gave me to understand that he expected a reply.

"I assure you, sir," answered I, "that this is the first I have heard of it, and that I know no more how they got away than you do."

"Are you prepared to account for your own disposal of that particular hour, Mr. Tomkins?"

"Certainly, sir. I spent it at Wandsworth, in company with another Greek prisoner who belonged to my unfortunate travelling party. And it happens, by a most singular coincidence, that he and a comrade both escaped, during the period of my visit, from that very gaol. So there are five of them gone altogether. It is one of the most remarkable circumstances which I can call to mind."

"Very remarkable indeed!" said the deputy governor, looking at me with ever-increasing mistrust. "Were you inside the prison, Mr. Tomkins, when this double flight took place?"

"Not only inside the prison, sir, but just outside one of the cells. The warder had opened the door to let me out, and while thus engaged,

with his eyes for an instant in the passage, the prisoner appears to have flown out of the window."

"I fear, Mr. Tomkins," said the official, after a short pause—"I fear it will be my duty to detain you for the present in custody."

"I think not, sir," I replied. "I can quite understand your astonishment at these mysterious escapes, and your anxiety, as a responsible officer of the gaol, to account for them. But I am sure it needs hardly a moment's reflection to convince you that such anxiety does not justify your suspicion of one who, on the face of it, is as palpably innocent as yourself. These five prisoners were certainly travelling under my charge, and with equal certainty misbehaved themselves. But I am in no way compromised by their misbehaviour; and I might have washed my hands of the entire party, and left them to shift for themselves, had I been so disposed. The fact that I have remained in London to see them through their troubles, and defrayed the expenses of their trial because they were friendless foreigners, and visited them from time to time in prison, is surely no reason for fixing upon myself any connivance at their escape. Except by the exercise of magic, which is absurd, it was clearly impossible that I should have set five prisoners free, all at once. And if you propose to charge me with liberating one of the five, which of them, may I ask, do you think I liberated?

and who liberated the rest? The one to whom I was nearest, and the only one whom I have seen to-day, escaped from his cell after I had left it; and the warder himself, assuming all responsibility for his flight, begged me as an eye-witness to sign a statement in the presence of the deputy governor, exculpating him from blame."

Of course there was no plausible pretext for detaining me, and I do not believe that the official would have ventured to hint at such a thing, had I not been fool enough to annoy him by grinning all over my face with exultation.

"I believe you are right, Mr. Tomkins," he said, after a while; "though I am sure you will agree with me that in the case of five simultaneous escapes so clever, so daring, and so incredibly successful, somebody or other must have been pulling the strings."

"Somebody must, indeed," said I, smothering a stupid smile with the most hideous grimace conceivable.

"Do you feel the heat of the room?" enquired the deputy governor civilly.

"Not at all, thank you. It was only a twinge of neuralgia in one of my wisdom teeth—I am subject to it."

"And may I ask, Mr. Tomkins, whether you have any theory of your own on the question of these wonderful flights, which might perhaps help us to a clue?"

"None whatever, sir, except this—that the Greeks are a most surprisingly sharp and cunning people. I have travelled in their country a good deal, and I have seen things done, by men in no degree above the average national intelligence, which would baffle the vigilance and astuteness of all the police in London. A typical Greek is in every sense so slippery that there are no possible means of holding him. I quite admit that the escape of five prisoners at the same moment is nothing short of a marvel; but if only one or two had got away, I should have thought it the most natural occurrence in the world. I doubt whether there's a prison in England that could keep a moderately clever Greek within its walls, if he had a mind to scale them."

I left the deputy governor my address, giving him the same promise which I had given at Wandsworth, and was allowed to go. Right joyously did I rush into the depths of the nearest hansom, where I could grin unseen, and chuckle to my heart's content without endangering my liberty. I caused myself to be driven to the terminus at Paddington, and took the next train to Hanwell.

"Just three hours and twenty minutes too late, sir," said the hall-porter, as he let me in. "Your friend gave us the slip about half-past twelve this afternoon, and not a mortal creature in the Asylum saw him go. It's the most remarkable thing, sir,

that has happened all the five and twenty years that I have been connected with Hanwell."

"Dear me!" exclaimed I, "this is very unfortunate. I was in hopes that the patient was getting better. Is the superintendent disengaged?"

"Yes, sir, and he will no doubt be glad to see you. Be so good as to step this way."

The superintendent knew nothing as yet about the escape of the five prisoners, and I had no particular interest in telling him the story. But it occurred to me that the withholding of so sensational a piece of news might hereafter increase suspicion against myself; so I recounted the events of the last few hours, to his profound astonishment, and went my way.

About five o'clock I returned to my rooms in Burrham Place, and asked Jemima to send me up some tea. While waiting for it I became aware that a visitor had been admitted into the hall; and the maid who brought in the tray, bearing what the lady novelists are pleased to call the "tea equipage," announced at the same time the arrival of "a gentleman."

"Glad to see you, Lord Alconbury," said I, ordering the addition to the "equipage" of another cup and saucer. "I dare say the tea will be strong enough for two."

"So it turned out to be Venus after all!" said my visitor, as soon as we were left alone. His

lordship looked like a man who had been prodigiously sold, but who derived no little comfort from the thought that the individual who had sold him was of sufficient importance to shed lustre upon his victim. Better be snubbed by a divinity than toadied by a plebeian.

"I don't quite understand you, my lord," said I.

"I think you understand me pretty well," he rejoined. "You know nothing whatever of what took place this morning at Sedgeworth, I suppose?"

"Yes," I replied; "I believe I may say that I know everything that took place there—that is, between the hours of ten and eleven."

"Did you happen to be in the church? I had not the pleasure of seeing you."

"I went, my lord, as an uninvited guest, for which indiscretion I trust you will accept my apologies; and I witnessed the whole ceremony, from its auspicious commencement to its abrupt and extraordinary close."

"And have you formed any theory with respect to the—a—the person who interrupted the proceedings?"

"He struck me as bearing a very strongly marked resemblance to a certain mythological character with whose figure every schoolboy is familiar. Beyond that point, I have formed no theory whatever."

"It has been a most remarkable adventure!"

observed his lordship, caressing his short, crisp, densely wooded beard, and wearing the same expression of mingled annoyance and self-complacency as before.

"Very remarkable indeed," said I. "But other metropolitan sites have witnessed scenes of wonder on this eventful day besides the modest village of Sedgeworth. You are perhaps unaware, my lord, that all five of the Greek prisoners have escaped from their respective cells, and that Apollo has liberated himself from his confinement at Hanwell?"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Lord Alconbury, in amazement. "And so they were real gods and goddesses after all!" he resumed, when I had finished my story.

"It would almost appear so," I replied, "were the thing not physically impossible."

"Well, Mr. Tomkins," said his lordship—"if you *are* Mr. Tomkins—you may be Praxiteles in sober earnest, or Pan in disguise, for all I know——"

"My lord!" I exclaimed with dignity, inviting the attention of my visitor to a pair of feet and legs which my friends have always taught me to contemplate as particularly well shaped and comely —by way of convincing him that I bore no suspicion of a goat about my terminations—"my lord! you do me too great an honour. There is nothing even semi-divine about *me* in limb or body. I

am Tomkins pure and simple, and have no connection whatever with even the lowest and shaggiest class of Olympian deities."

"Well, Mr. Tomkins, you have contrived to mix yourself up with a most extraordinary set of people, Olympian or otherwise; and I am by no means certain that it has not become my duty to furnish some short account of sundry episodes in your personally conducted tour, for the consideration of the Commissioner of Police, or the—Superintendent at Hanwell."

"You are at perfect liberty, my lord, to do either the one foolish thing or the other. It can make not the slightest difference to me. In your case, I think, I should hold my tongue. But if you care to make yourself ridiculous by telling a story which nobody except a lunatic will believe, go and tell it, by all means, this evening at your club, and take the consequences. Shall I pour you out another cup of tea?"

Soon after dinner a four-wheeled cap drove up to the door, and disgorged a portly matron of mature but still blooming years, together with an incredible array of boxes and bundles.

"He has left me, Mr. Tomkins!" cried my landlady, in a lamentable voice, coming into the sitting-room the moment she had finished squabbling about the fare.

"Left you, Mrs. Jones—I beg pardon, Mrs. Neptune? How heartless! how abominable! Pray

take a chair, and tell me all about it. Dear me! it's a wicked world."

"Yes, Mr. Tomkins," said the doubly widowed widow. "He went off this morning, just as we had sat down to an early dinner, in order that we might enjoy a nice long afternoon in a sailing-boat on the Thames. I had bought him a ready-made nautical suit of blue serge, with brass buttons and anchors on 'em — cost me three pound ten, Mr. Tomkins—and a straw hat; and he did look *beautiful.* Well, sir, we were dining at a table by ourselves in the garden of the Clutterbuck Arms, and had barely finished our first dish of pickled salmon, when Neptune got up and said, 'Excuse me, my love, I'll be back directly.' I know he said that, though it was all in Greek, by the way he waved his seafaring hands. Take my advice, Mr. Tomkins, and don't ever fall in love with a young woman as you can't talk to. Expressive looks and fiddlin' with the fingers is all very well for a time, but a conversation carried on in that style for several days on end becomes irksome. Well, he walked into the house, and I finished the rest of the pickled salmon, which was that good, I couldn't find it in my heart to leave it—and still the captain stayed away. I waited and waited, and wouldn't touch the shoulder of lamb, though it was getting so cold that the grease floated about on the gravy like icebergs. At last I got up and went to look for

him; but he wasn't in our own room, nor in the dining-room, nor in any of the public rooms, nor nowhere. He *must* have gone off of his own accord, for he took all his property with him—or rather, *my* property I should say, for not a thing except the shoes he stood in was his own."

"What a villain he must have been, Mrs. Neptune!"

"No, sir; don't call him that, I beg. Outraged as I am, I can't bear to hear him abused. The love that I lavished upon that man, Mr. Tomkins—and the sums of money that I squandered on him! What with the special license, and the presents, and the expensive way we lived, and the first-class travelling, and the suit of sailor's clothes—I'm fifty pounds out of pocket, Mr. Tomkins, if I'm a penny, though my fun didn't last five days. But do you know, sir," added the good lady, suddenly brightening up, and exhibiting much the same look of sheepishness combined with self-importance which I had noticed in Lord Alconbury—"do you know, sir, I've a kind of idea, in spite of everything to the contrary, that it *was* Neptune after all!"

"Do you think so, madam?" I rejoined.

"I do indeed, sir. I've been badly treated, Mr. Tomkins, if ever a woman was. But it *is* a consolation to have been made the dupe of a deity. Though the Ruler of the Waves has deserted me, and left me alone upon the rock, I

shall never cease to regard myself, Mr. Tomkins, as the Bride of the Sea."

"You can tell that story to your friends, madam, if it affords you any gratification to do so. I don't imagine that a great many of them will believe you." And then I recounted the tale of the asylum and the prisons, and dismissed the good lady to her own apartments, to bewail her second widowhood at her leisure.

While sitting afterwards alone I could not resist the inclination to discover, by means of my magic stone, whether the divinities were actually safe in their ethereal abode. Surely if I breathed again upon the surface, and rubbed it as before, Ganymede would fly down upon his eagle to find out what I wanted.

I put my hand inside my shirt-front and drew forth the chain by which the locket had been secured, but the charm was no longer there. Its place was usurped by a dry, hard, wizened kidney-bean, as untalismanic in appearance as anything could be. Out of revenge for the inconvenience caused by my medicine, or by way of marking his displeasure at my supposed bad management of my celestial team, Jupiter had taken my treasure from me; and the same irrevocable decree which had wafted the deities to heaven had whisked away also my only means of communication with my friends on high. Considering that, but for my happy possession of the

locket, the pet deity of Olympus would have been ignominiously whipped and the strong man hanged, I think Jupiter would have shown no more than common gratitude if he had permitted me to retain my plaything.

Before retiring to rest that night I held a small audit of accounts, by way of ascertaining the precise financial condition in which my divinities had left me. I found that the travelling expenses for three months had amounted to less than a thousand pounds, and the fees in connection with the trials, including a small sum of money which I bestowed upon the unfortunate gardener's widow, to about five hundred. I was therefore a clear £1500 to the good; and, as the people at the head-office declined to accept any portion of my receipts, the profit was all my own.

To this extent, I had every reason to congratulate myself upon the successful issue of the undertaking. Nor could I honestly deny, when reviewing the experiences of the last thirteen weeks, that the greater part of the trip had been an unmixed pleasure. The month now almost ended had indeed brought me many an anxious day and many a sleepless night; but things had set themselves straight at last, and the time would doubtless come when I should be able to discover bright points in the hazy distance, even while looking back upon our troubled life in Lon-

don. Nevertheless, as I added up the last of my figures, and congratulated myself upon the enjoyment of a well-earned holiday, with the pleasing accompaniment of a useful little sum in hand, I formed a resolution which I have never broken yet, and which will remain unbroken until my dying day. I am the most obedient humble servant of the travelling public, and it will always afford me pleasure to pilot the British tourist to any quarter of the inhabited or uninhabited globe; I will go to Jerusalem, or to Madagascar, or to North and South America, or to the moon; but never again, as long as I continue in the business, will I take round a select party of gods and goddesses on a personally conducted tour.

THE END.

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